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December 1994

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Letter From the Editor

Nancy Lieberman-Cline is not a woman of leisure. The Brooklyn, N.Y., native, who divides her time between Omaha and Dallas, recently finished staging Omaha's NFL Air-It-Out flag football competition. Although it was Omaha's first-ever competition, it turned into the most successful event in Air-It-Out's history.

Nancy is the owner of Events Marketing, Inc. in Omaha, which promotes sporting events around the country. She also does color analysis for men's and women's basketball on ESPN, the SportsChannel, Prime Network and Home Sports Entertainment.

Despite a schedule that would leave lesser people in perpetual exhaustion, Nancy recently found time to provide her insights in a preview of the NU women's basketball team (see page 32).

Nancy writes from a perspective few will ever know. Her prominence in the basketball world began at the tender age of 17, when she was a member of the gold medal-winning team at the Pan American Games in 1975.

She won a silver medal the following year at the Montreal Olympic games. That feat put her in the record books as the youngest basketball player in Olympic history to win a medal for the United States (a record she still holds).

Nancy's visibility continued to increase when she led Old Dominion University to consecutive national championships in 1979 and 1980. She was twice named the collegiate National Player of the Year.

Nancy turned professional in 1980 when she became the first draft choice of the Dallas Diamonds in the Women's Basketball League. She led the team to a championship in 1984.

In 1986, Nancy became the first woman to play in a men's professional league when she joined the Springfield, Mass., Fame of the U.S. Basketball League. Another "first" occurred in 1988 when Nancy joined the Harlem Globetrotters World Tour and became the first woman to play for the Washington Generals.

Nancy's accomplishments were recognized in her home town in 1993 when she was inducted into the New York City Basketball Hall of Fame. She was the first woman to be so honored.

Over the last few years Nancy has provided color commentary for the Cleveland Cavaliers, Washington Bullets, New Jersey Nets and Charlotte Hornets. She also gained national recognition from her experience as Martina Navratilova's conditioning coach.

Nancy's off the court activities include membership on the Board of Trustees for the Women's Sports Foundation and the Editorial Advisory Board for Nebraska Sports Magazine. She also is a regular speaker for various national corporations and universities, and she contributes her time to several charities, including the Special Olympics.

Nancy's priority list, however, is headed by someone who knows nothing of her accolades and accomplishments: She and her husband, Tim, recently became the parents of a baby boy, T.J.

Parenthood is probably not that much of a stretch for a women who has left her mark both on and off the basketball court. It demands stamina, toughness, and physical and emotional strength. These are qualities Nancy Lieberman-Cline has proved time and again to possess in abundance.

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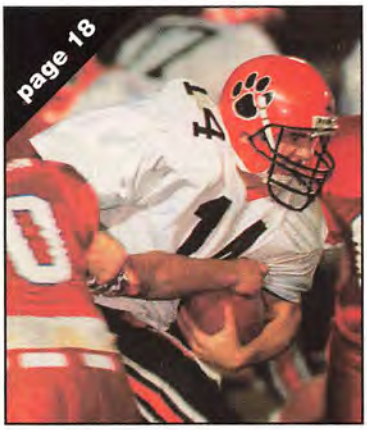

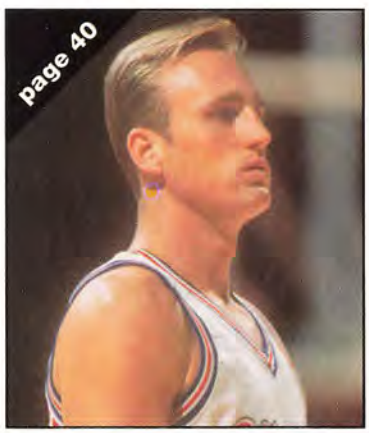

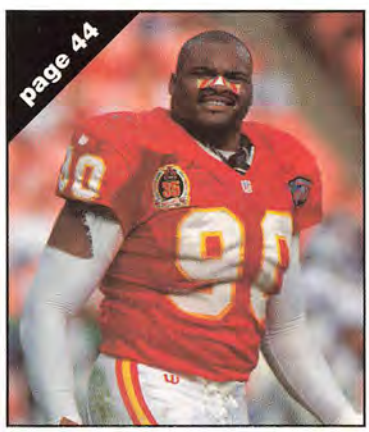

NEBRASKA SPORTS Magazine

Volume 1, No. 2

FEATURES

12 A Walk in the Park for the Huskers
NU leaves no doubt about who is No. 1
by Richard Egan

16 Dana Altman Comes Home
Nebraskan leads Creighton basketball into an unknown future
by Ron Petak

18 High School Football Roundup
Surprises abound during 1994 prep playoffs
by Dan Silvia

25 NU Offensive Line
by Richard Egan Cover Photo by Eric Francis

28 NU Men's Basketball
Growing accustomed to success
by Sean Weide

32 The Word Is Out
Angela Beck's Huskers keep the tradition alive
by Nancy Lieberman-Cline

34 Sports Bars
Where everybody loves your team
by Tim McMahan

37 Racers Here to Stay
by Kevin Warneke

40 Eric Piatkowski's California Dream
The NBA rookie seeks success in the Golden State
by Kenneth J. Kreiker

44 Neil Smith Has His Eye on the Prize
Former NU lineman aims for the Super Bowl
by Nick Schinker

49 A Tradition All Their Own
Wayne State is marking its territory
by Chuck Green

DEPARTMENTS

3 The Lineup

5 NSM Athlete of the Month

7 Inside Nebraska Sports

10 Out of Bounds
by Jim Rose

52 Where are They Now?
by Michael Watkins

54 Sports Town Nebraska
by Cindy Murphy McMahon

58 Between the Lines
by John Knicely

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The Lineup

Ryan Woodard

Omaha Roncalli senior **Ryan Woodard** became the second leading passer in Nebraska high school history when he passed for 240 yards in the Crimson Pride's defeat of Plattsmouth. He finished the season with 5,394 yards in career passing. Woodard passed for a state-leading 234.4 yards a game in 1994 and ended the regular season with 1,875 yards passing, 112 completions in 198 attempts (a 56.6 percent completion rate), and 14 touchdowns.

Kelly Lindsey, a sophomore at Millard North, successfully defended her state title by winning the Class A girls gold medal at the state cross-country meet in Kearney. Kelly's brother, senior **Casey Lindsey**, finished fourth in the boys race behind gold medalist **Cortney Lamb** of Lincoln Southeast. The brother and sister duo placed first in their respective events at the Metro Conference cross-country championship.

Kelly & Casey Lindsey

Mike Schuchart

Lincoln golfer **Mike Schuchart** birdied the final hole to win the 1994 Nike Tour Championship. It was Schuchart's largest payday—$40,500—since turning pro nine years ago. The win means Schuchart, a former Lincoln East and University of Nebraska golfer, qualifies for the 1995 Nike Tour.

Debbie Hawks of Omaha set a national women's quarter-mile drag racing record in the 1-E ladies class in a stock 1987 Corvette. Debbie's husband, **David Hawks**, set a national men's quarter-mile record in the 1-E mens class three weeks later. Debbie is a special education teacher at Westside High, and David is a shop teacher in Omaha.

Debbie & David Hawks

Honorable Mentions

Lincoln East won a state-record seventh consecutive Class A boys tennis title in Omaha. The Spartans' No. 1 doubles team of **Ryan Haith** and **Kelsey Moran** won a gold medal, as did **Clarke Tefft**, the Spartans' No. 2 singles player.

NU cornerback **Barron Miles** continues his quest for the Jim Thorpe Award. As of the Kansas game, the preseason All-America candidate has blocked three punts, grabbed four interceptions, made 34 tackles (21 solo), and has nine pass breakups to tie the school record.

Lincoln Northeast gymnast **Amy Kumpula** finished second in the all-around at the state gymnastics tournament. **Martha Strain** of Lincoln East finished third all-around, and Lisa Bukacek of Lincoln Southeast finished fourth.

Millard North's **Sean Contreras** won the all-around title at the All-State Boys Gymnastics Invitational in Lincoln. Contreras also won the high bar, vault and rings. Papillion-LaVista won the team championship.

NU junior middle blocker **Allison Weston** recently earned player of the week honors from the American Volleyball Coaches Association. She helped lead the Huskers to recent victories with 21 kills against Illinois and 22 kills against Colorado.

John Frillman of Omaha finished 17th in the PGA Senior Club Professional Championship in West Palm Beach, Fla. The finish qualified Frillman for the PGA Seniors' Championship next April.

The Lineup

Honorable Mentions

UNO quarterback **Josh Luedtke** was named the state's NCAA Division II offensive player of the week, and linebacker **Kory Andreasen** earned defensive player of the week honors after the Mavericks first win of the year against Northern Colorado. Luedtke completed 14 of 22 passes for 303 yards and four touchdowns in the win, which broke UNO's 14-game losing streak. Andreasen had four solo tackles and 10 assists.

UNO Quarterback Josh Luedtke

Nebraska sophomore I-back **Lawrence Phillips** rushed a career-high 33 times for a personal best 221 yards in Nebraska's 32-3 win over Oklahoma State. Phillips ran for three touchdowns, tying his career game best. The sophomore from West Covina, Calif., broke the 1,000 mark against OSU, just the seventh Husker sophomore to do so. He has amassed 1,489 rushing yards this season with two games to play.

Damion Morrow and **Ahman Green**, the Omaha Central High backfield duo, combined for 435 yards rushing and four touchdowns in an Eagle victory over Omaha South. Morrow had 244 yards, including touchdown runs of 18 and 55 yards. Green had touchdown runs of 80 and 35 yards, and 191 total yards.

UNL punter Darin Erstad leads the Big 8 in punting

NU senior offensive tackle **Zach Wiegert** was named one of four finalists for the 1994 Lombardi Award. The award is given annually to college football's top lineman. Previous NU winners include Dave Rimington and Rich Glover.

Elkhorn High junior **Catha Fogelberg**, a foreign exchange student from Sweden, shot a 4-over-par 76 to win the all-class gold medal in the 21st annual Girls' State High School Golf Championship in Norfolk.

NU senior defensive tackle **Terry Connealy** was awarded a scholarship grant from the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Foundation. Connealy is a three-time Academic all-Big Eight team member and was a first-team All-Big Eight player in 1993.

Senior setter **Kristen Wakley** of Norfolk became Nebraska Wesleyan's all-time volleyball assist leader. She surpassed Julie Lee's school record of 2,567 assists.

UNO volleyball coach **Rose Shires** reached the 100-win plateau against Peru State. Shires, in her fifth season as head coach for the Lady Mavs, served as UNO's assistant coach for two years.

Nebraska Wesleyan senior linebacker **Mike Einspahr** leads the Nebraska-Iowa Athletic Conference in sacks. The Lincoln native recorded two sacks for 26 total yards in losses in a losing effort against Doane.

In his first year on the gridiron, NU punter **Darin Erstad** leads the Big 8 and is fourth nationally in net punting, with a 40.8 average through the Kansas game. Erstad is an All-Big Eight outfielder for Nebraska.

Inspirational Athlete of the Month

While playing with a partially collapsed lung in his first career start at quarterback for NU, junior **Brook Berringer** led the Huskers to a victory over Wyoming. He passed for 131 yards and ran for 74 yards with 3 touchdowns. He then played the first half against Oklahoma State, until an X-ray showed another partially collapsed lung. As of the Kansas game, Berringer is 5-0 as a starter in place of the injured Tommie Frazier. He now wears a specially made flak jacket to protect his lung.

NEBRASKA SPORTS MAGAZINE

ATHLETE OF THE MONTH:

Nicki Van Deursen

photo by Eric Francis

Nicki Van Deursen's eight-year gymnastics career may have suffered a premature end, but no one can deny it ended in dramatic fashion.

Van Deursen recently won the all-around championship at the 21st annual Girls State Gymnastics meet in Lincoln for the second consecutive year, edging Amy Kumpula of Lincoln Northeast by a .05 point margin.

A junior at Millard North High School, Van Deursen also led the Mustangs to their second straight team title as Millard North beat Lincoln Southeast.

Van Deursen accepted the gold medal with tears in her eyes. Afterward, she said she has no regrets about "the end of an eight-year love affair with gymnastics."

Her career has been cut short by scoliosis, or curvature of the spine. She was fortunate to compete at all this year, as she was scheduled to have back surgery last June. The surgery was postponed when Van Deursen decided she wanted to compete one more season. Her doctors gave her the go-ahead.

"The fact that she even competed this year says a lot about Nicki," says Millard North's gymnastics coach Bridget Kowal. "She could have just quit after her big win last season, but she wanted to keep going. She's a real competitor who never gives up—she's always looking on the positive side."

At last year's state meet, Van Deursen won every individual event. This year, she won the floor exercise as well as the all-around title. Despite falling hard on her back during her uneven bar routine, her final event, she resumed her performance to remain in competition for the all-around title.

Van Deursen brought Bree Dority of Kearney onto the awards platform with her for the gold- medal presentation. Dority didn't qualify for the all-around award because mats used by her coach to spot during the uneven bar event were later deemed illegal. After the meet, Dority's parents sent Van Deursen a dozen roses.

"Nicki is the most upbeat and sensitive person I have ever met," Kowal says.

During Van Deursen's surgery, which has been rescheduled for December, a rod will be inserted into her back to straighten her spine.

Although she won't be competing for Kowal next year, Van Deursen will serve as team manager for the Mustangs.

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It's a Kick at College of St. Mary

The College of St. Mary soccer team ended its inaugural season with a loss. It was just about the only negative event in a year which took nearly everyone by surprise.

The Flames were undefeated in the Midlands Collegiate Athletic Conference. They went into the MCAC tournament with a 15-2 record, and handily beat Avila 6-0 in the first round, and then edged Kansas Newman 2-1 in the championship game for the conference title.

The Flames then lost a 2-1 heartbreaker against Rockhurst in the first round of the NAIA Midwest Region tournament. The game was marked by bad weather and high winds, and, according to coach Dan Harvey, a lot of luck on the part of Rockhurst.

"We completely outplayed them, we were just unlucky," says Harvey, who also coaches soccer at Omaha Duchesne Academy. "A wind-aided free kick beat us."

CSM forward Kari Stacy

After the Rockhurst game, freshman forward Kari Stacy was named co-winner of the conference's offensive player of the week, for the second time this season. Stacy, a 1994 graduate of Papillion-LaVista High School, finished the season with 39 goals out of 128 attempts, 14 assists, and 92 points while playing in all 20 games

"You hate to lose the final game of the season, but I am very pleased with the way the girls played this year," Harvey says. "In terms of where we were at the beginning, from the three-day training sessions in early fall to where we finished up. It was just remarkable, the improvements they made"

Making their performance even more remarkable was the fact the team was comprised primarily of freshman. Harvey believes a year of college-level experience will prove invaluable to next year's team.

"I'm still looking to recruit six more players," he says. "I'm trying to fill the role of playmaker."

The team didn't have a true playmaker this season, Harvey says. "The girls who filed that role did a super job, but if I get a playmaker I think we can go even further."

Harvey is trying to get a tougher schedule next year, "so we're better prepared for the tougher games. Our goal is to win the national championship in the next three years."

The College of St. Mary recently joined the eight-team Midlands Collegiate Athletic Conference of the NAIA. The school also has a new athletic director, Bob McCabe.

McCabe, who used to be the Flames' basketball coach, also manages the athletic facilities at CSM. The school is building a $4 million physical fitness center, which is scheduled for completion in January, 1995.

"The new fitness center should help with recruiting," McCabe says.

Aside from soccer, CSM currently fields teams in four other sports: volleyball, softball, golf and tennis. The tennis team went to the national finals last year. McCabe says he hopes to start up a basketball team in the next year or two.

New On-Field Leader for the Royals

The Omaha Royals will start their 1995 season with a new leader in the dugout. Mike Jirschele replaces Jeff Cox, who was named the new third base coach for the Kansas City Royals.

Jirschele played briefly for Omaha as a utility infielder near the end of his career. Jirschele finished his playing career with the Royals organization as a player-coach for Class A Appleton in 1990.

Jirschele is the 14th Omaha manager in 27 seasons, and is the fourth former Omaha player to lead the team. The others were John Sullivan (1977-78), John Wathan (1987) and Jeff Cox (1992-94).

Jirschele has been a manager in the Royals system for the past three years, where he compiled an overall record of 213-116. Last season he piloted the Class A Wilmington (Del.) Blue Rocks of the Carolina League, where he had a 94-44 record.

The Blue Rocks captured the league championship, and Jirschele was named Manager of the Year. Baseball America magazine named the Blue Rocks its 1994 Minor League Team of the Year.

Jirschele had been named manager of the year twice before, the first time in 1992 at Gulf Coast, and again in 1993 at Rockford.

The Royals' coaching staff will remain the same for the 1995 season, with Mike Alvarez returning for his third year as pitching coach and Tom Poquette as Omaha's hitting coach.

Jirschele's first order of business in Omaha will be to return the Royals to the American Association playoffs for the first time since their 1990 championship season.

In other offseason news, Royals' pitcher Dennis Rasmussen recently was hired part-time at Creighton University's sports information office. The Creighton alum still plans to pitch for the Royals in 1995.

Football is a Learning Experience for B.E.A.R.S.

The North Omaha B.E.A.R.S. are well known in the Metro Omaha area for excellent midget football teams. But there's more to the program than just football.

The varsity B.E.A.R.S. midget football team was beaten by league champion Kingswood Panthers, 18-6.

The B.E.A.R.S. after-school program, for children ages seven to 14, was founded at the North Omaha Boys Club by Michael Carter, Father Flanagan High principal Jerry Faulkner, and Omaha South High principle Jerry Bartee.

B.E.A.R.S. stands for Building Esteem and Responsibility Systematically through Academics, Athletics and Social Enhancement. The program, which meets at Father Flanagan High, was originated to provide positive role models and healthy alternatives to children who many would deem at risk. A native of Omaha, Carter is the varsity football coach and program coordinator of the B.E.A.R.S. He is a graduate of Princeton and is a former semi-pro football player in Omaha.

At press time, the B.E.A.R.S. varsity midget team had a record of 6-2 with one game remaining. The team finished its season on Nov. 19, but unlike past years the varsity won't be making a post-season trip to Florida to compete in the Super Select division at the National Midget Football Tournament.

"Not this year," says running backs coach Terrance Mackey. "The kids are tired, and the season may be too long already. We qualified to go, and the kids are a little disappointed that we aren't going."

The B.E.A.R.S. were slated to finish second in the Metro Midget league behind the Kingswood Panthers. "This is the first time we haven't been league champions in five years," Mackey says.

The B.E.A.R.S. two losses came against the Panthers. Mackey is philosophical about the losses. "Some you win, some you lose," he says.

Besides athletics, the B.E.A.R.S. have an academic program where kids receive assistance from volunteer tutors, parents and school counselors. On Wednesdays the B.E.A.R.S. have "social enhancement, with speakers to help keep kids out of trouble," Mackey says. Other days the kids participate in sporting events. Besides football, the B.E.A.R.S. have basketball and track teams for both boys and girls, and cheerleading for the girls.

Besides coaching, Mackey also does fund-raising for the group. It's a job he finds rewarding. "Kids needed someone to be a positive influence in their lives," he says.

NSM Jinx for Tommie Frazier?

Just one week after the first issue of Nebraska Sports Magazine made its debut with NU quarterback Tommie Frazier on the cover, the former Heisman hopeful was felled with blood clots in his right leg. The staff at NSM hopes this was not the start of a trend. Should any member of the NU offensive line be beset with an obscure ailment after the publication of this issue, people may begin to talk.

Creighton University's soccer team rally for two goals in the second overtime period to beat Evansville 3-2. The win, in the first round of the Missouri Valley Conference tournament at Tranquility Park in Omaha, advanced the Bluejays into the tournament championship game against Drake, where they won 1-0. The win clinched CU's third straight MVC title, and guarantees a berth in the NCAA tournament.

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Out of Bounds

by Jim Rose

On a recent "Sports Day Mid-America" show, I interviewed Ben Rutz, the former Nebraska quarterback who quit the team last January. Rutz, a prep phenom from Oklahoma City, packed up his belt buckles and cowboy boots and rode his own range to Miami Oklahoma.

There, he could play pronto for Northeast Oklahoma Junior College. Under NCAA rules, Rutz could have transferred to another Division I school but wouldn't be eligible to play for one year. Rutz felt his razor-sharp quarterback skills were collecting dust in Lincoln and a one season rehab project at a junior college would get him back on the wagon trail of major college football.

This isn't the story of Ben Rutz' nontraditional trek toward the NFL, but rather it is the fallout from my live, on-air interview with him. At the time, we did the interview because Tommie Frazier had been declared unfit for duty with his first blood clot. If Rutz had stayed in Lincoln, he would have been sitting in the football first chair.

I thought the audience would find his thoughts on the subject of interest. It did. Little did we know, however, the interview was a violation of NCAA rules. Because of my association with the Nebraska Sports Network (radio broadcasts of the NU games) and the NSN's contract with the university, there is some language that loosely classifies me a representative of NU.

Under the terms of the radio contract with flagship station KFAB in Omaha, the radio network provides certain promotional advertising for NU sports. Under NCAA regulations, any person(s) or group involved with the promotion of the university is classified as a representative. And, under NCAA recruiting rules, only coaches are allowed to make contacts with prospective student-athletes, and only during certain times of the year. In addition, those coaches can only contact recruits once a week.

Rutz, as a junior college player, is considered a prospective student-athlete. My comments with him were first thought to have been considered a recruiting contact.

The sliding bar doors were closing! Visions of no bowl, no TV, no off- campus recruiting and scholarship reductions filled our joke books.

There was a happy ending, however. Though the rule book interpreted in such a way accurately describes me as "a representative of the Institution," NU does not compensate me for "SportsDay Mid-America." That's the mitigating factor.

If not, then each time NU places a newspaper ad for a women's soccer game, a gymnastics meet or the conference wrestling championships, that newspaper business could be considered a contracted vendor for NU for promotional consideration. Which is fine, until the a sportswriter reports and quotes prep football or basketball recruits.

Even the NCAA recognizes a class of media reporters and segregates them from official parties for the purpose of marketing and merchandising. As I found out, that is about the only sane approach the NCAA takes on the issue of its sprawling rule book.

My near miss made the media rounds. Ken Hambleton of The Lincoln Journal-Star sent me a copy of The NCAA Register, which regularly lists all of the secondary (minor) violations turned in by the individual schools or conferences. What follows are actual NCAA rules violations, with my suggestions for punishment.

•NO PASS, NO HIRE RULE: A women's softball team was nailed for having an assistant coach who had not taken the coaches' certification test and accompanied the head coach on two recruiting trips. ACTION: Guilty coach must go back and do junior high over.

•HAND-IN-THE-COOKIE-JAR RULE: A women's basketball team staff received expenses to scout the same opponent on two occasions. ACTION: Coaches must consent to front and profile shots to be posted above each gym door in the league.

•WRONG GAME RULE: Head coach of a baseball team observed four innings of a junior college game and was in violation, even though that coach didn't sign any players. ACTION: Coach must personally audition all candidates for the singing of the national anthem.

•SLUMBER PARTY RULE: Women's diving team is guilty after a recruit shared a hotel room with a member of the team. Forget the fact that the two kids have been friends for years. ACTION: No phone for a month even after homework is finished.

•CAN'T KEEP TRACK RULE: Baseball coach didn't carry the seven when figuring financial aid for his program. He mistakenly granted all of .32 over the permissible amount. ACTION: In addition to reducing that program's financial aid availability for the next year, the NCAA also mandated that the coach be drilled with flash cards.

Nobody is suggesting a demolition of the NCAA law library, but in an effort to police sports, rules have been created with no thought of sane enforcement. Naturally, regulations against extra benefits are necessary, but the number of contacts rule should be eliminated. The NCAA should let coaches and programs recruit freely. What's wrong with a famous Nebraskan contacting a recruit if it helps? What's wrong with utilizing a past sports hero in the process? It's part of the experience.

Much of the worst illness in college sports comes because either the kids don't have money to begin with or can't legitimately earn it. Oh, it's available, but from the wrong dudes. Give the kids a descent stipend, get a federal exemption from Social Security and workman's compensation laws and presto! The lure of breaking the rules all but disappears.

Naw, it makes too much sense. Let me thumb through the rule book. Common sense has to be a violation.

Jim Rose is the host of "SportsDay Mid America with Jim Rose," a nightly radio sports call-in show.

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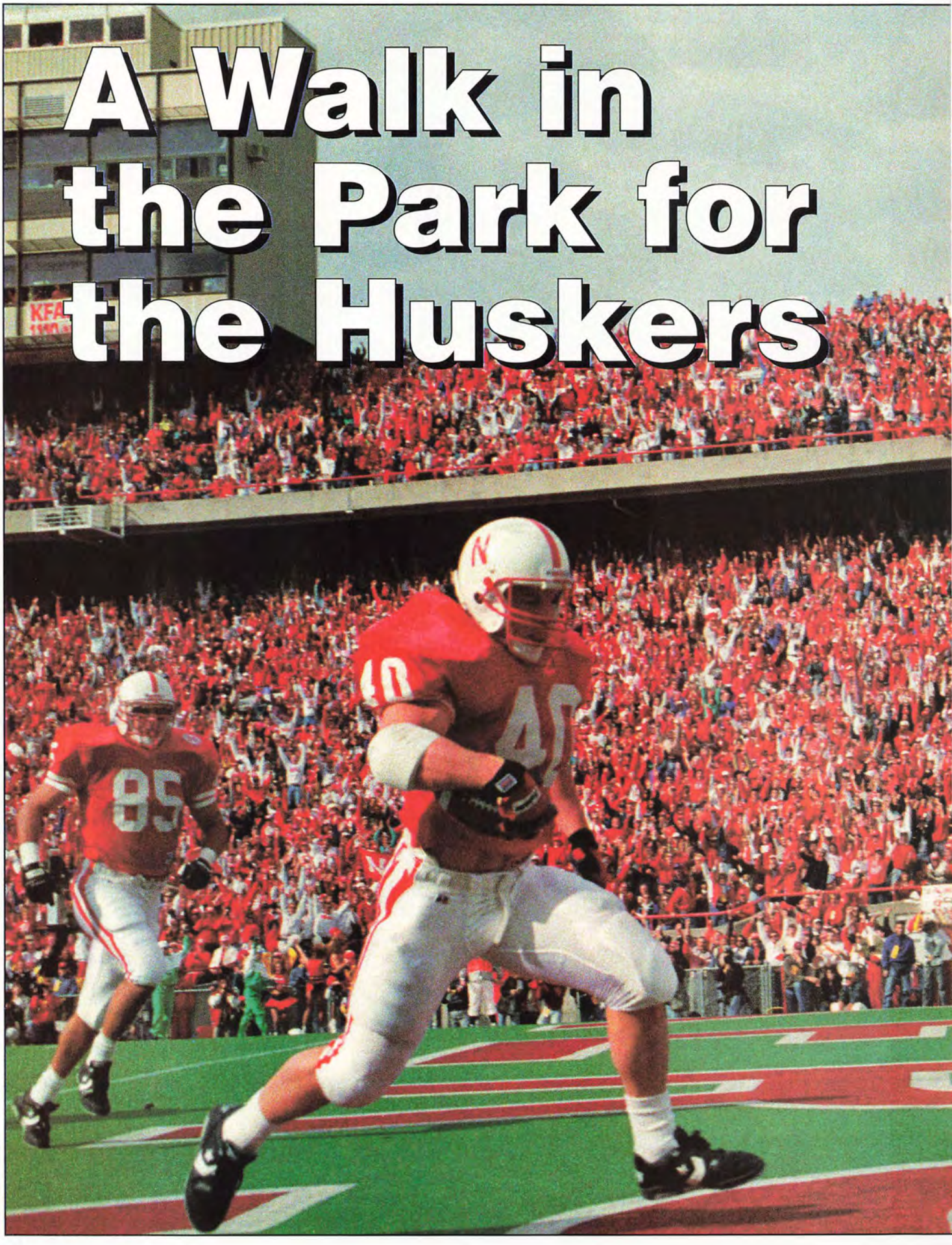
A Walk in the Park for the Huskers



photos by Eric Francis

by Richard Egan

Heading into the Oct. 29 titanic with Colorado, the Nebraska Cornhuskers had an ace up their red sleeve. This prompts the question: With an 8-0 record, a fleet of talented backs that led the nation in rushing offense behind an awesome front line, a group of "Blackshirts" bent on defensive mayhem, and the No. 2 and No. 3 ranking in the nation, did they really need anything else?

Well, when the opponent is Colorado, also rumbling along undefeated, packing a potent offense and defense with a mean streak and a score to settle after the 52-7 shellacking the last time the Buffaloes were here, anything helps.

The Huskers' ace? Big Red had nothing to lose.

Oh sure, there was the inside track to the Big 8 title (ho-hum), a trip to Miami and the Orange Bowl (a chance to thaw out), and a date with some trash-talking, high-stepping, NCAA probe-ducking team from Florida.

But when Nebraska sets a goal at the beginning of the year, it doesn't kid around. The only goal the Huskers strive for is to be No. 1. When Heisman Trophy candidate Tommie Frazier went down with blood clots in his right leg, however, most felt the Huskers' chances for a national championship went down with him. It's OK, you can admit it.

Nebraska still was among the nation's elite, but the writing was on Lee Corso's forehead: no offense, no title. Defenses may win championships, but not the heart of America's pollsters. For that you need flash, pizzazz, a quarterback and Penn State's schedule.

The Huskers still had plenty going for them: an indomitable offensive line, a defense that was getting better each week, superb coaching and a silo of tradition. But there were doubts. Remember squirming in your seat as Wyoming, yes, Wyoming complet-

ed pass after pass and had the Huskers on their heels much of the day? Remember the sweat on your forehead as Brook Berringer wheezed on the sideline and Matt Turman took the helm?

And face it, even a healthy Berringer wasn't stirring Big Red fans to lay down deposits on Miami hotel rooms. He is completely capable and won't fumble or throw dumb passes. But was he cut from national championship cloth?

Nobody was saying it out loud except sportswriters, and they get paid to say dumb things, but the Huskers were going to give it their all, lose a game or two, finish in the Top 10, and come back in 1995 with a healthy Frazier and make everyone pay for it dearly.

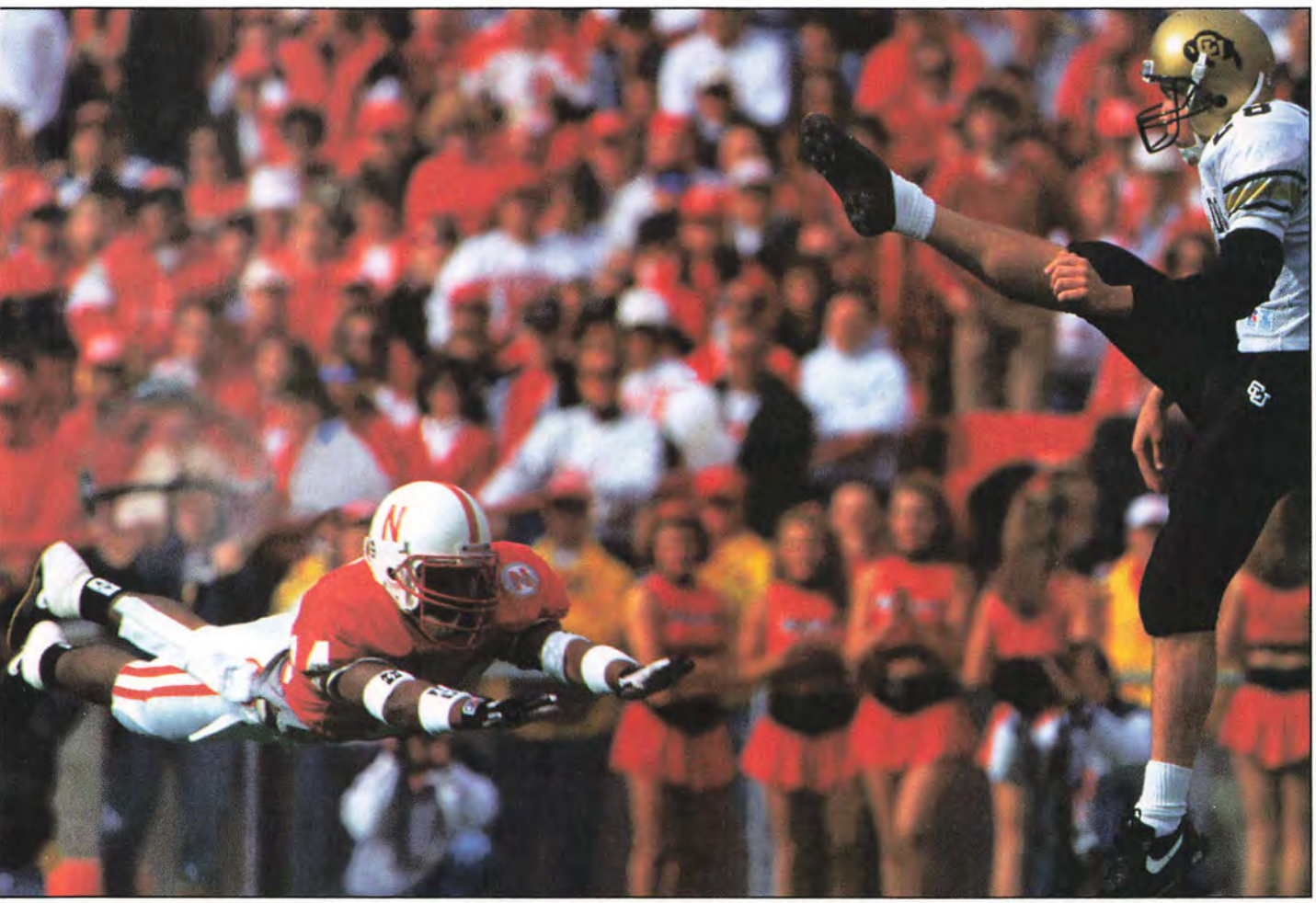
Even though the Colorado game was in Lincoln, the Buffaloes were favored over the Huskers by a point. There was no great hue and cry over this because everyone in Lincoln that wasn't suited up for the game believed a one-point Colorado victory was completely within the realm of possibility.

Especially without Frazier. No one would have liked it, but no one likes ice storms either. Fans would have dealt with it like good Nebraskans and gotten on with their lives.

The thought of the Nebraska football program as an object of sympathy is a new one. But NU had lost not one but two quarterbacks.

Coach Tom Osborne was actually gracious after the Huskers had dominated a nationally ranked Kansas State team and DROPPED a place in the polls.

Lawrence Phillips continues his string of plus 100 yards rushing per game average.



Barron "Superman" Miles has made opponents very aware of his speed and ability to block punts.

NU cornerback Tyrone Williams keeps CU wide receiver Michael Westbrook in frustration.

Tough luck, the football pundits said. See you next year.

Colorado wasn't just another rough patch for the Nebraska steamroller, and not because CU coach Bill McCartney started a rivalry with the Huskers to give the then-lowly Buffs a star to shoot at.

The players didn't see it that way. Quarterback down? We'll deal with it. Another QB down? We'll deal with it. Think you can score on us? Go ahead and try.

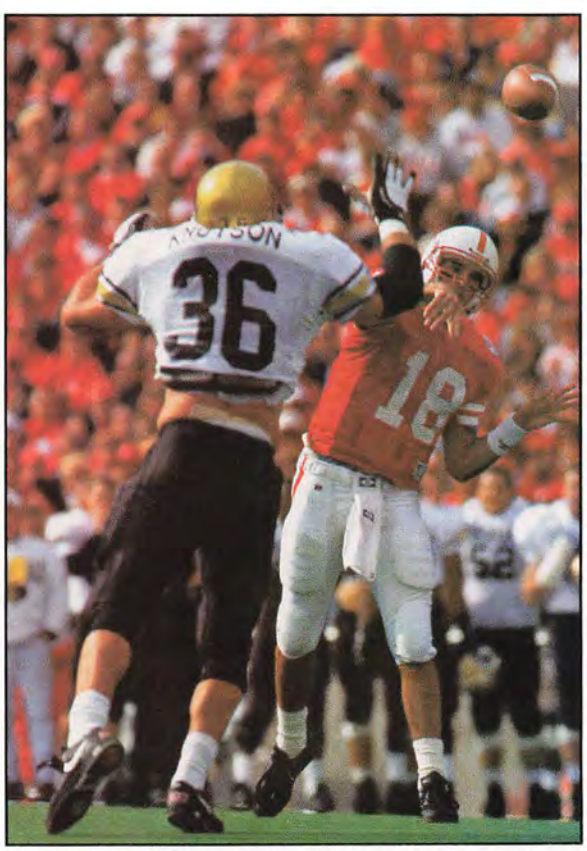
The media might have given up, and some of the fans were watching between their fingers, ready to hide their eyes if it was a Buffalo day, but NU players had nothing to lose.

Colorado, on the other hand, had everything to lose. This was the Buffaloes' year. They were destiny's children. And the talk all week was that if the Buffaloes could beat Nebraska they would vault over Penn State into the top spot.

Except that Nebraska dominated play in every phase of the game. Colorado had 89 yards of total offense in the first half, a number it regularly achieves on the first drive of the game. Heisman candidate Rashaan Salaam? No factor. Heisman candidate Cordell Stewart? Hey, it's tough finding receivers when you're on your butt. Third-down efficiency for the game? Zilch. Fourth-down efficiency? The same.

When the Huskers took over the No. 1 spot in the Associated Press poll the next day, Coach Osborne moonwalked into the Tuesday press conference, leaped onto a table, spiked an orange and screamed "IN YOUR FACE!!!" to the media.

Well, in our dreams anyway. But wouldn't it have been great? ■



NU quarterback Brook Berringer answers his critics with a stellar performance against CU.

Altman Leads CU Basketball Into an Unknown Future

by Ron Petak

Creighton University's top basketball recruit of this decade will carry the weight of an impoverished basketball program on his shoulders this season.

The school's first big-name recruit since Benoit Benjamin arrived on campus a dozen years ago, this former junior college standout has folks in Omaha looking forward to Bluejay basketball once again.

The recruit is Coach Dana Altman, the man charged with reviving Creighton's basketball fortunes.

"The first thing we have to do is improve the image of the program. I say that only in the fact that when you lose, everything is magnified," Altman says. "Creighton basketball has a great tradition and we just have to get people to remember that."

Creighton's basketball vault is full of wonderful memories, including postseason tournament appearances as recent as 1989, 1990 and 1991. But Altman wasn't lured away from Kansas State to host the Bluejays' Golden Oldies Hour on the Hilltop. Altman was hired to make Creighton a Top 40 basketball station again.

The call to Altman came on the heels of Rick Johnson's resignation at the end of the 1993-94 season. Johnson's ballclubs struggled to a 24-59 mark during his three-year tenure, including a school-record 22 losses last year. As the wins dwindled, so did attendance at Bluejay home games. Creighton needed a fix, and CU Athletic Director Bruce Rasmussen was convinced Altman had the tools to get the job done.

"I dare anyone to find someone to say Coach Altman is anything other than an outstanding basketball coach," Rasmussen says. "He will fulfill what he was hired to do. It will only be a couple years before we go back to having the success Creighton teams are accustomed to."

All within the confines of Creighton's strict academic standards, Rasmussen insists.

"Coach Altman led the Big Eight in graduation rates. He will recruit, retain and graduate outstanding athletes," Rasmussen says.

When Creighton administrators sent out a search party last spring to find a new leader for its basketball program, Rasmussen, then associate athletic director, already had a name in mind.

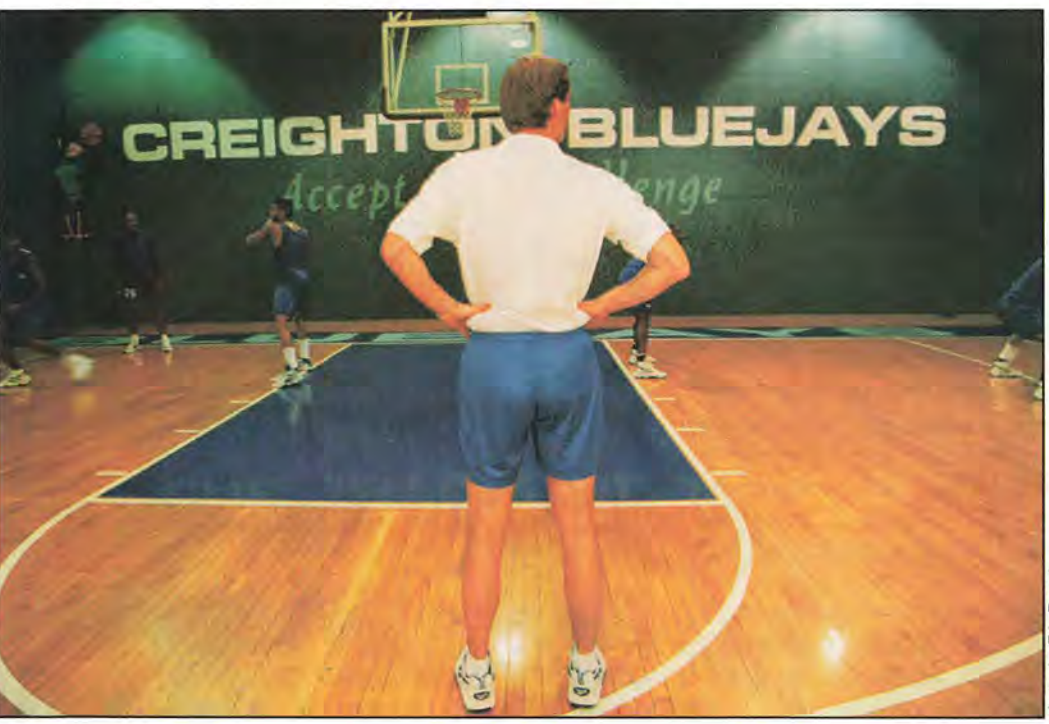
Rasmussen, who coordinated Creighton's rise to prominence as the 12-year head coach of the women's basketball team, knew Altman was "underappreciated" at K-State and wasted little time going after the man he wanted. Less than a week after the initial contact with Altman, who spent most of that time in New York as his Wildcats played in the NIT Final Four, Creighton had its 14th head coach in the program's 75-year history.

The move made great sense for Creighton — a young, experienced and successful Division I coach, a Nebraska native from Wilber, a noted teacher of the game. What wasn't quite as clear is why Altman would leave the prestige of the Big Eight Conference for the less glamorous Missouri Valley Conference.

But Altman never hesitated to sign on Creighton's dotted line.

"It's no secret I had my list of detractors at Kansas State," Altman says.

"We never had everybody heading in the same direction, and that's tough to do at a school like Kansas State. If you don't have all your students, all your alumni, all your boosters believing and working in the same direction, it's pretty hard to get it done. After I came up here and



photos by Eric Francis

met with the people here, it was a fairly easy decision. It was something I felt comfortable with and I've never thought twice about it since."

Rasmussen says Altman has the full support of the Creighton community.

"He is outstanding in dealing with the many different Creighton families—the faculty, staff, alumni, fans, students and the community. This is a very good marriage between Creighton University and Coach Altman."

Altman knows he won't, or can't, revive Creighton's program on his own. He's going to need the support of all the in-laws he can find.

"There's 300 schools playing Division I basketball and of that 300, there's 150 of them very, very serious about their program," Altman says. "If we're going to be one of those 150 that is very serious about their program, then it's going to take a commitment on a lot of people's part."

To do that, Rasmussen says CU supporters only need to follow Altman's lead. "It's not a matter of if he's going to get it done, but when."

Altman's track record supports Rasmussen's prediction. In nine years as a head coach, Altman has experienced just one sub-.500 season, 13-15 in his first year at Kansas State in 1990-91. As a junior college coach at Southeast Community College in Fairbury, Neb., and Moberly Junior College in Missouri, Altman posted records of 29-6, 25-9, 35-5 and 34-4.

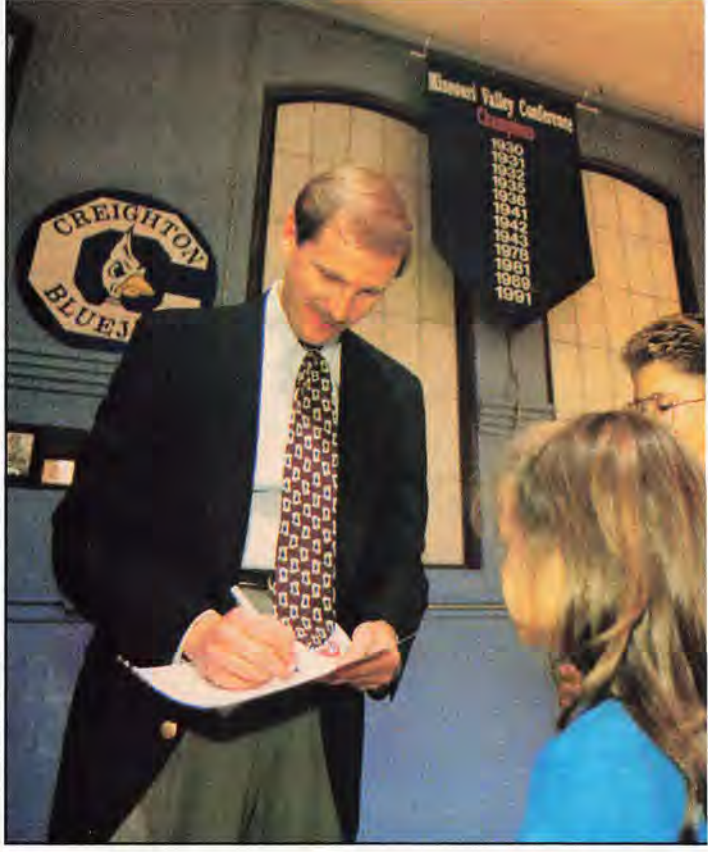
He served as Lon Kruger's assistant at K-State for three seasons before accepting the head coaching job at Marshall University in 1989. In his only season at Marshall, he was named the Southern Conference's Coach of the Year.

When Kruger left Kansas State for Florida in 1990, Altman returned to Manhattan to lead the Wildcats to post-season appearances in 1992, 1993 and 1994. His five-year run as a Division I coach produced an 83-67 record.

Now it's Creighton's turn.

Unlike some of his peers, the 36-year-old Altman knows time is an ally. Altman doesn't have to win 20 games this season, or even 15. He has time to introduce his style of basketball to the CU faithful.

"For us to say we have to win X-number of ball games, I'd rather talk about what we have to do to win those ball games," Altman says. "We want to play hard. We want to be a good defensive team. We've got to improve rebounding, cut down on turnovers and make the extra pass. When we start improving in each one of those four areas, the wins will come eventually."



Three seniors who are being asked to contribute to that improvement are forwards Nate King and Donald Davenport, and guard Jason Bey. King, the squad's leading scorer a year ago with 15.7 points per game, says the Creighton turnaround starts with attitude.

"There were days last year when half the team didn't want to come to practice," King says. "There's much more excitement now. You're eager to be at practice. Coach Altman can bring this team a lot of success. He can put us on the map."

Bey, CU's only fourth-year player, was one of the first to jump on Altman's bandwagon.

"I guarantee this is going to be a winning program again," Bey says. "This year, the outlook and atmosphere is really positive. Most players, most people around Creighton, know the reputation Coach Altman has. I have a lot of confidence in him."

One thing Altman isn't going to do is make excuses with the players he has, despite the fact only five of the 12 roster players have Division I experience. Altman's only input to this year's roster are three junior college transfers – Tad Ackerman, Adrian Grinnon and Marcus Lockett. Altman disagrees that he won't get the job done until he gets "his players" on campus.

"That's just not fair to these freshmen that are here from Coach Johnson. When I stepped on this campus, (1994 recruits) Jimmy Sexton, Joel Templeton, Jermond Remmer, the three freshmen who were signed last year (Troy Wharton, Randall Crutcher and redshirt freshman Adam Reed), those guys are my guys now. They're good players, good guys, and I think they all have a chance to be solid Division I players," Altman says.

That, Altman says, will be accomplished with hard work.

"The way we build is very slowly, playing as tough and hard-nosed as we possibly can," Altman says. "I feel my job is to give us an opportunity to win, and we'll play whatever tempo gives us the best chance to win. We just got to get guys to play a little harder and work a little harder."

It won't be easy, especially with the likes of Marquette, SMU, Nebraska, St. Louis and Iowa State on the non-conference schedule.

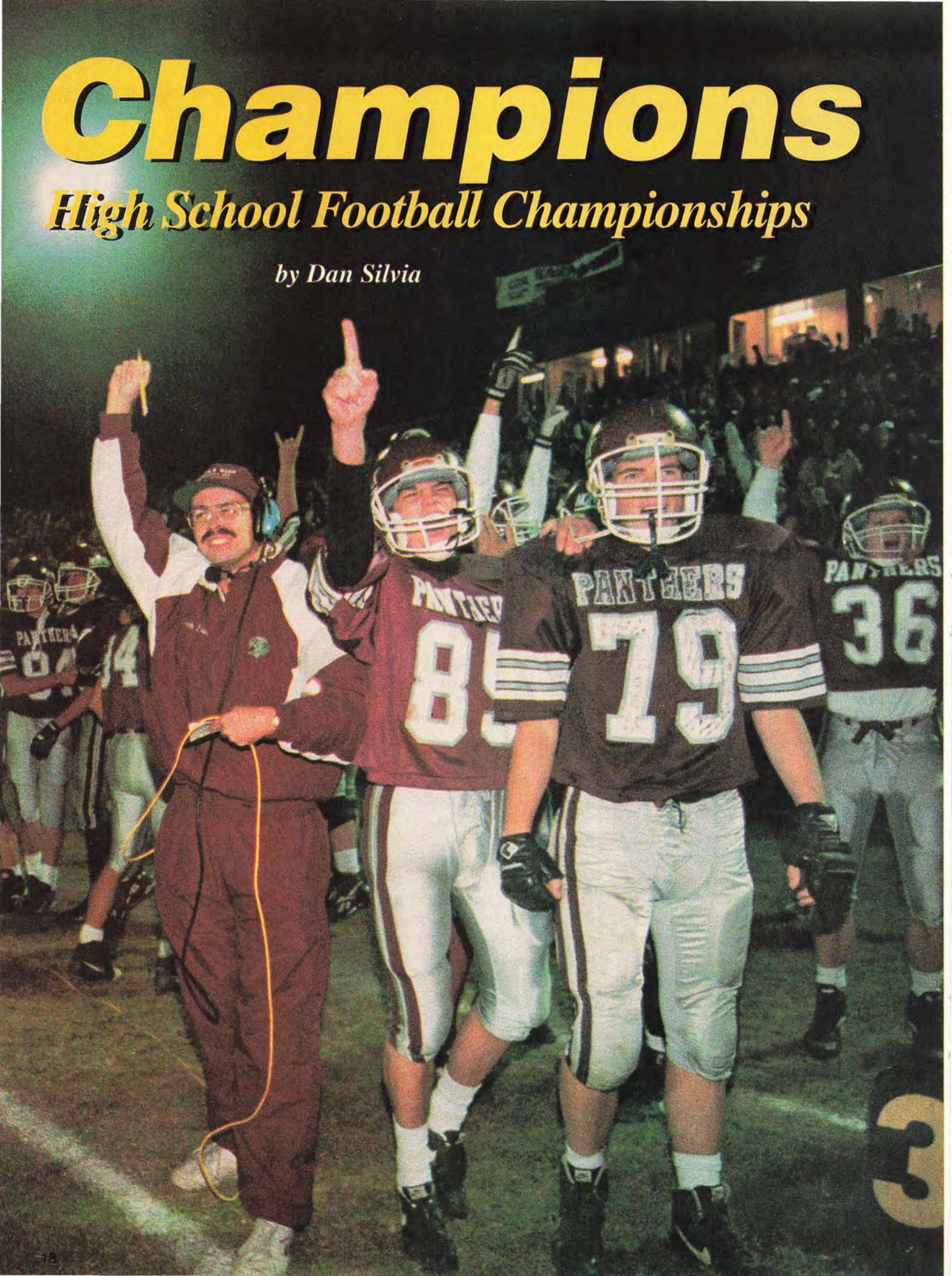
All against a backdrop of an ongoing 30-game road losing streak.

"We've got a lot of challenges ahead of us," Altman says. "Getting that road thing off our back is one, trying to get to St. Louis (MVC postseason tourney) is another. Getting this thing headed in a different direction, trying to get the corner turned and headed back the other way, is probably our biggest challenge. ■

Champions

High School Football Championships

by Dan Silvia



Zapping the Bunnies' Batteries

Stopping the Bunnies—a lot of people have tried to do it. But King Kong, Darth Vader and several Metro Conference football teams haven't been able to get the job done.

In the Class A football championship, Norfolk managed to do what others failed to accomplish. The Panthers controlled the football and kept the explosive Omaha Benson offense on the sidelines en route to a 27-19 victory in Norfolk.

The win capped a perfect 12-0 season for the Panthers and gave the school its first-ever state football title.

According to Norfolk Coach Dan McLaughlin, his team won the battle in the trenches.

"We controlled the line of scrimmage, both offensively and defensively" he says. "That was it."

The Panthers piled up 377 yards of total offense, compared to 142 yards for Benson. Despite Norfolk's statistical advantage, the game was relatively close until the fourth quarter.

The Bunnies showed how dangerous they could be early in the first quarter. After stopping Norfolk on three plays to start the game, Benson benefited from a short Panther punt into a stiff wind. On Benson's first play from scrimmage, Zannie Adams took a pitch from Chris Handy and raced 30 yards for a touchdown.

Benson wide out Mike Haynes pulls in a 25 yard pass from QB Handy

"We knew that they could do that," says Norfolk defensive lineman Scott Goodell. "With speed like that any play can break. We just had to come back and play tough."

Norfolk tied the game in the second quarter with a drive of a different kind. Panther fullback Chad Bell barreled into the end zone from one yard out after a 17-play, 82-yard drive. Bell finished the game with 182 yards on 27 carries.

"He's as good a fullback as we've seen," says Benson coach Lonnie Tapp. "He really damaged us."

After the teams exchanged fumbles, Benson threatened again. Handy hooked up with wide out Mike Haynes for a 25-yard completion to put the Bunnies on the Norfolk 3-yard line. Haynes made the catch despite having two defenders draped over him.

"It was a flag pattern," Haynes says. "(Handy) threw it over my right shoulder. I saw the defender back there and we both went up for it. It hit him in the chest and he grabbed a hold of it. I just took it out of his arms and came down with it."

The Bunnies tried to push the ball into the end zone with three consecutive runs, but Norfolk held. Benson finally got the touchdown when Handy scrambled and found Joe Jones with a 2-yard pass. Norfolk blocked the extra point attempt.

The Panthers took a 14-13 lead into the locker after Kyle Eberhardt scored on a 9-yard run with 31 seconds left in the half.

Benson, which had won the toss and had elected to defer the ball, decided to kick with the wind at its back to open the second half.

The Bunnies hoped for a repeat of the first half, pinning Norfolk in their own end and gaining good field position. The Panthers, however, refused to follow that game plan.

Norfolk Senior Quarterback Curtis Miller fights off Benson would be tackler Doug Jennings

A healthy Benson QB Tory Veland vs Papio in semi finals

Norfolk quarterback Curtis Miller connected with tight end Matt Skiff on a 39-yard pass to move the Panthers down the field. Bell then scored his second touchdown of the game on a 37-yard run early in the third quarter.

Tapp says Norfolk's size advantage on the offensive and defensive lines started to wear on his team.

"We thought we could play with them a little bit, but after awhile their size started telling on our little people up front," he says. "They started kicking us off the ball. You have to take your hat off to Norfolk. That's a real fine football team."

Unwilling to give up, Benson closed to 21-19 when Tory Veland scored on a 2-yard run. The two-point conversion failed when Eberhardt broke up a pass attempt.

Veland, who started most of the Bunnies' games at quarterback, was limited by a sprained ankle suffered in Benson's semifinal victory over Papillion-LaVista. "We brought (Veland) up here and he was a little stiff on the trip," Tapp says. "We decided to go with (Hardy) and he played pretty well."

Miller sealed the victory for Norfolk with a 9-yard touchdown run in the fourth quarter.

The outcome was not a big surprise for McLaughlin. "We're a championship football team," he says. "We can do a lot of things and we showed that."

The Panthers were aiming for the championship early in the season.

"We expected to be good," McLaughlin says. "I'm not sure we expected to be this good. After the third game, when we played Lincoln Southeast and beat them 35-7, we thought we had a chance if we got lucky and nobody got hurt."

McLaughlin says his team didn't let the pressure get to them after the Panthers were ranked No. 1 during the regular season.

"We've never been there, so we didn't know how to react," he says. "We just played each game. We didn't worry about whether we were No. 1 or No. 3 or No. 4. These kids did a great job of staying focused all year."

After scouting Benson on film, McLaughlin felt his team would be in good shape. The Bunnies managed a few surprises, however.

"Film was so deceiving," McLaughlin says. "We really thought from film that we were a lot better than they were. We guessed wrong. They were a great football team."

Benson ended the season with a 9-3 record. Tapp says he is proud of his team's effort.

"That's a good bunch of kids," Tapp says. "I love every one of them. We got beat by a very good football team. (Norfolk) is the No. 1 football team in the state."

Norfolk running back Chad Bell breaks away from Benson's Teddy Cotton

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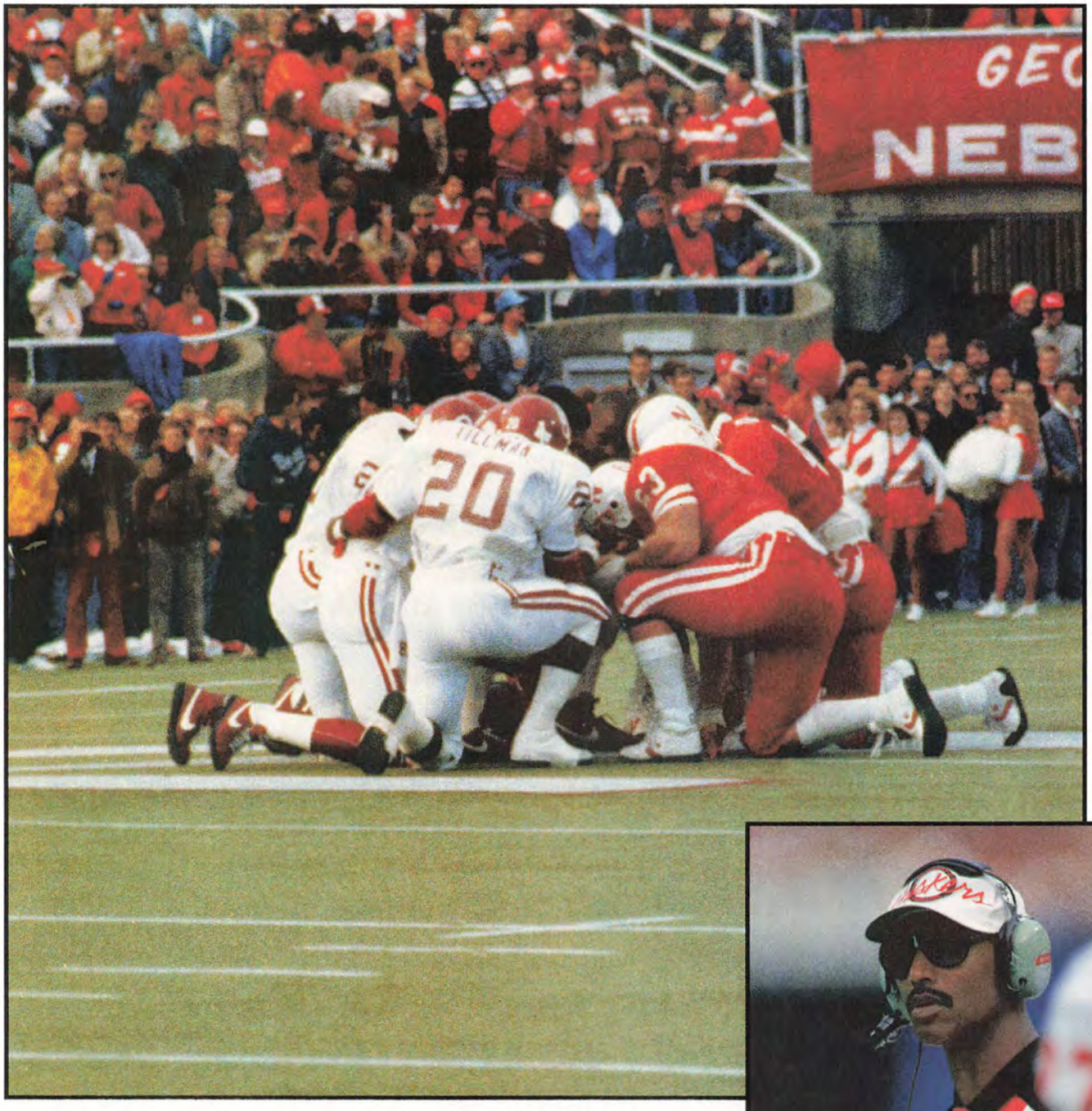

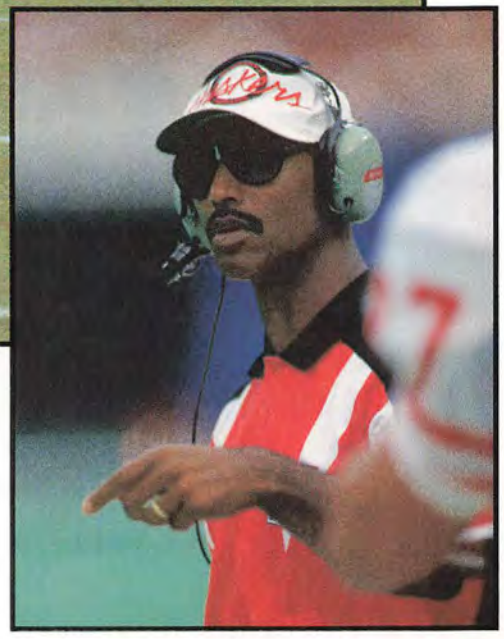

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Not Many Laughs for McCook in Class B Finals

Despite an 11-0 record coming into the Class B state championship football game, McCook coach Bob Fuller knew his team would have its hands full with Hastings.

The Tigers were Class A champions last season and had posted a 9-2 record against large-school competition in 1994.

"We respect their schedule and who they've played," Fuller says.

Such respect proved well-founded. Hastings rolled over McCook 56-16 in Hastings to claim its second consecutive state championship.

Josh Kohl scored the first of Hastings' six first-half touchdowns on a 1-yard run. Cori Dreher hauled in a 30-yard pass from Steve Jones for another Hastings score. Ben Buettenback and Darius Kohl each scored on 11-yard runs, and Josh Kohl closed out the scoring for the Tigers in the first half with a 48-yard run.

McCook's Neil Mickey got his team on the board with an 8-yard run in the first half.

Hastings piled up 408 yards of total offense, compared to 207 yards for McCook. Kohl finished with 177 yards rushing on 16 carries for Hastings, while Mickey led the Bison with 105 yards on 22 carries.

Hastings coach Walt Olsen says he wasn't sure what to expect from his team coming into this season.

"We felt that we had an opportunity to be pretty good again," he says. "There are three things that we always look at. First is how some of these guys that have never played varsity react. We've had several of them step up an do a nice job for us."

The second thing, Olsen says, is the injury factor. "We've been fortunate for two years in a row not to have any devastating injuries," he says.

"The third thing is you just don't know what the others teams are going to have. Much like last year those three things have kind of fallen into place. We've had some kids step up. We've stayed relatively injury-free. Outside of Norfolk we've competed very well with every other team we've played."

Olsen says moving from Class A to Class B didn't bother his squad.

"We really didn't feel any affect to be honest, because our schedule remained exactly the same as it was last year," he says. "It was nice to know that were we in Class A we would have qualified (for the playoffs again)."

Despite the lopsided defeat, Fuller says his team had a lot to be proud.

"These kids may not be the biggest, the fastest and the strongest, but they have an awful lot of heart and an awful lot of character," he says. "I don't know how you can put a measure stick to that. I guess it's just that they play the game hard and they play the full 48 minutes. They give you everything they have."

Hastings Senior running back Josh Kohl breaks another long run.

Hastings Quarterback Steve Jones in semi final victory.

Arthur Claims Six-Man Championship

Arthur claimed a 72-42 victory over Hildreth to claim the six -man state championship. Nathan Knott picked up 297 yards on 21 carries to lead Arthur. Knott scored seven touchdowns in the game. ■

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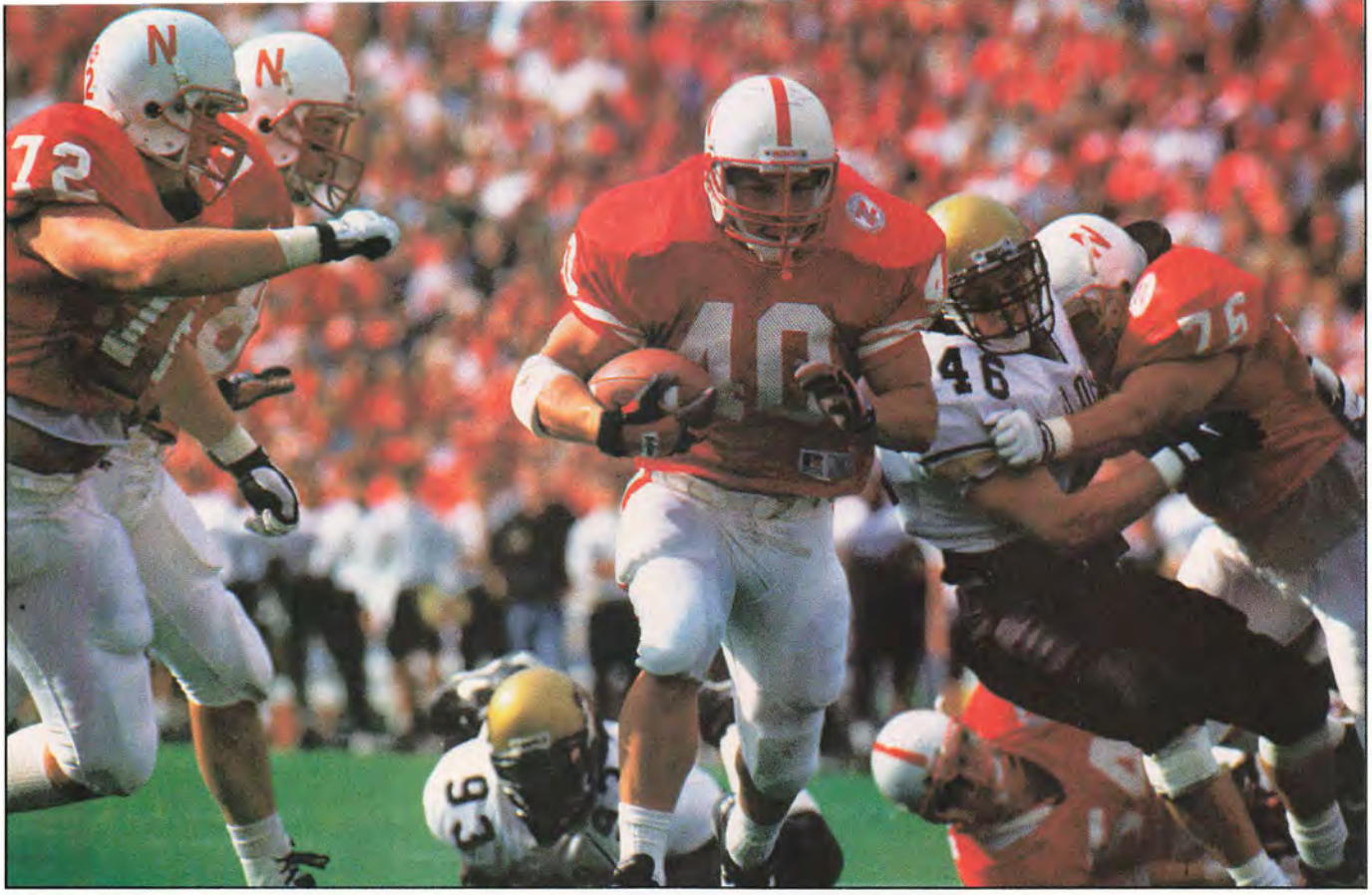


photos by Eric Francis

NU Offensive Line

For Nebraska's offensive linemen, a good outing means a dozen pancakes.

by Richard Egan

Not the kind that fill a breakfast plate. They're flattened opponents left on the Husker turf while a Nebraska running back burrows forward for a first down. Joel Wilks, a 6-foot-3, 280-pound senior, sits atop the Husker pancake pile this season. The left guard finished with 19 pancakes against Oklahoma State and 17 against Wyoming.

The Husker linemen look forward to watching film after each game where they grade their performances. That's when the pancakes are stacked.

"As we look at the films, we can see whether a block was a whiff, if you just got a piece of him, or it was a pancake," says right guard Brenden Stai. "The eye in the sky never lies."

Wilks and Stai, along with teammates Rob Zatechka at left tackle, Aaron Graham at center and Zach Weigert at right tackle, give the Huskers plenty of beef up front. Together, they average 6-foot-4 and 295 pounds.

Even more impressive than their size is their quickness. That mobility is apparent each time the Huskers call a counter sweep with Weigert or Zatechka leading the way.

"It's a great feeling," says Weigert, a 6-foot-5, 300-pound consensus preseason All-American. "Lots of times you go unnoticed in the pile so it's really fun to go out and squish a safety. Hey, that's what they're there for. It's my favorite play because you can get out there and show what you can do."

Zatechka agrees. "It's nice to do

something different other than lining up and slugging away at the other guy."

With Nebraska's 1994 season full of uncertainty, the Husker offensive line has been solid. First, blood clots sidelined Heisman Trophy candidate Tommie Frazier for the season. Then, backup Brook Berringer temporarily went down with a collapsed lung.

With the quarterback position in constant flux, the offensive line continues to open holes for I-back Lawrence Phillips and help the Huskers lead the nation in rushing yardage.

"The line as a whole has to take charge," Zatechka says. "We think it's our responsibility to make the offense go."

While offensive linemen typically go unnoticed, the Husker crew has drawn attention. No matter, Graham says.

"You have to be interested in more of the game than getting your name in the paper or receiving awards or scoring touchdowns. Offensive linemen are the ones who really enjoy playing the game."

Weigert first drew attention to the Husker line when he was named Player of the Game by ABC after Nebraska's home opener against UCLA. The notoriety can have its drawbacks.

Expectations grow, Stai says. "The publicity makes it fun, but it can be bad, too. (The offense) gets stopped and people say, 'Hey, I thought they were supposed to be so good'."

Senior offensive tackle Zach Wiegert leads the way for Lawrence Phillips.

Milt Tenopir, with 20 years as Nebraska's offensive line coach, said his five linemen learned a lesson in last year's Orange Bowl loss to Florida State. They decided then that this year was theirs, Tenopir says.

Tenopir has coached offensive linemen with more talent than this year's bunch, he says, but he's never had a line that's this balanced. "There are no glaring weaknesses."

Weigert says that commitment goes a little farther back than the season-ending loss to the Seminoles. Weigert and his colleagues knew when they were redshirt freshmen that they had the potential to excel, he says.

"We had the attitude that we'd be playing together someday and we stayed late in the weight room, worked harder and knew we were getting the chance."

Graham and Stai say that commitment means the Husker offensive line is one tight bunch. The five hang out together on and off the field.

"The main thing is the camaraderie we have, and knowing that our potential hasn't been reached," Stai says.

Graham adds: "One of us doesn't carry the load any more than another. I suppose I could look up to the other four as seniors, but we encourage one another equally."

When the 1994 Husker season is just a memory, Zatechka says, he hopes Nebraska fans won't forget the offensive line.

"You just want to play to the best of your ability. You want to be remembered as someone who worked hard,

Rob Zatechka Defies the Stereotype

One of the first things one notices about Rob Zatechka is his number, 56, which is more suited to a center or linebacker than an offensive tackle. You'd be willing to bet that he was some sort of misfit playing out of position at left tackle–until you see him blast off the line and mow down another overmatched opponent.

"There were only a certain amount of numbers lefts and I just grabbed it," Zatechka said. "Just grabbed it" is what Zatechka has done with life. All-America candidate is practically a footnote in the personal profile of the 6-foot-5, 305-pound Lincoln native who has already completed his undergraduate work in biological sciences with a perfect 4.0 GPA. He was the male student of the year at NU in 1993, the first athlete to earn the honor, and is a candidate for a Rhodes Fellowship to study at Oxford University in England. His graduate studies this fall include endocrinology, immunology and art history.

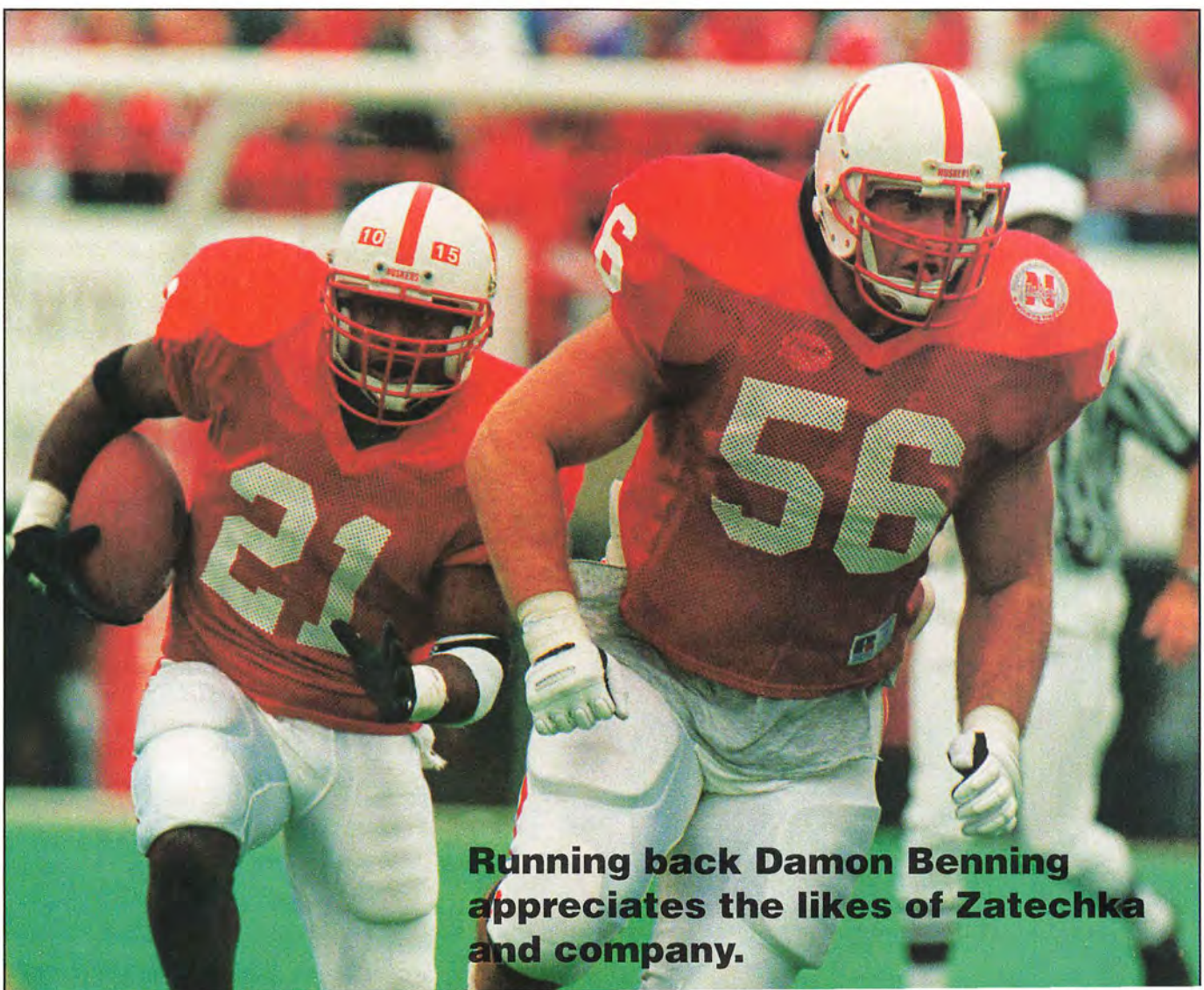
This articulate giant takes all the "dumb lineman" jokes and drives them through the wall in back of the end zone. And if someone does try to zing him with a snide remark? "I don't say anything." he says, "I let them be the one who is closed-minded."

While a big part of Zatechka's success can be attributed to his phenomenal strength (he can bench press 475 pounds) it's his speed and agility that turn heads and flatten opponents. Running backs don't have to pull up to wait for him to clear the way; the issue is more on whether they can keep up.

"I've always been pretty heavy into weightlifting," Zatechka said. "I was one of the strongest guys on the team when I came here as a freshman. It plays a big part, it makes me quicker and I'm able to do more things."

Zatechka doesn't often come out on the short end of individual battles. "It's been a couple of years where I had a game and said that guy just used me," he says. "The last might have been (Miami's) Rusty Medeiros (in the 1992 Orange Bowl). He schooled me a little bit. The way I work in the weight room, I rarely come across someone who is stronger than I am."

Zatechka's humility comes through in his response to whether or not he's looking forward to the NFL. "Knock on wood," he says with a smile, "I'd love to." The only wood to knock on if Zatechka doesn't go high in the draft is inside the head of who ever lets him slip past.



Running back Damon Benning appreciates the likes of Zatechka and company.

NU Men's Basketball:

Growing Accustomed to Success

by Sean Weide

When Danny Nee walked out of the Lincoln Country Club on a crisp spring night in March 1986, after having accepted the head coaching job for the men's basketball program at the University of Nebraska, the Brooklyn, N.Y., native knew he faced a formidable task.

After all, at the time the University of Nebraska was best known for its football team, not its basketball program, which lay in a state of disarray following the abrupt resignation of Coach Moe Iba after NU's first round-loss to Western Kentucky in the NCAA Tournament.

"I knew we had a big challenge ahead of us but I was really looking forward to it," Nee says.

The following day at the press conference to announce his hiring, Nee set the tone for his tenure with words that still ring true today.

"I would like to be a complement to the football program," Nee said. "There are some fine programs here, and I think basketball can be one of them. Nebraska fans love Nebraska football, basketball, baseball, whatever. If you put a good product on the floor, they'll respond to it positively."

What the 48-year-old could not have possible predicted at the time was that his program would eventually rise to great proportions and begin to slowly cast a shadow in the spotlight on the Huskers football team.

While Nee's 146-103 record in nine seasons doesn't come close to approaching Osborne-like proportions, 85 of those victories have come in the last four seasons. Nee ranks as Nebraska's second-winningest coach behind Joe Cipriano's 253 victories in 17 seasons (from 1964 to 1980). Nee's .586 winning percentage is the best in school history among coaches who lasted at least five seasons.

Along the way, there have been milestones to go with the winning. The past two years the Huskers produced their first back-to-back 20-win seasons. Last season was only the eighth 20-win season in the school's 98 years of the sport. They also won their first-ever Big Eight Tournament title, and finished the season ranked 22nd in the final Associated Press poll, marking the second time in the last four seasons that the Huskers finished among the nation's elite.

photos by William Lauer

Junior guard Eric Strickland hopes to build on last year's Big 8 success.

Interest in Nebraska basketball is approaching record proportions. A record average crowd of 14,475 fans packed the sold-out Devaney Sports Center for the Huskers' seven Big Eight home games last year. And more than 5,000 fans turned out to welcome the team at the Devaney Center after the Big Eight Tournament.

Just like their football counterparts across campus, Nee's roundballers are growing accustomed to the postseason, having earned berths in the NCAA Tournament the past four seasons.

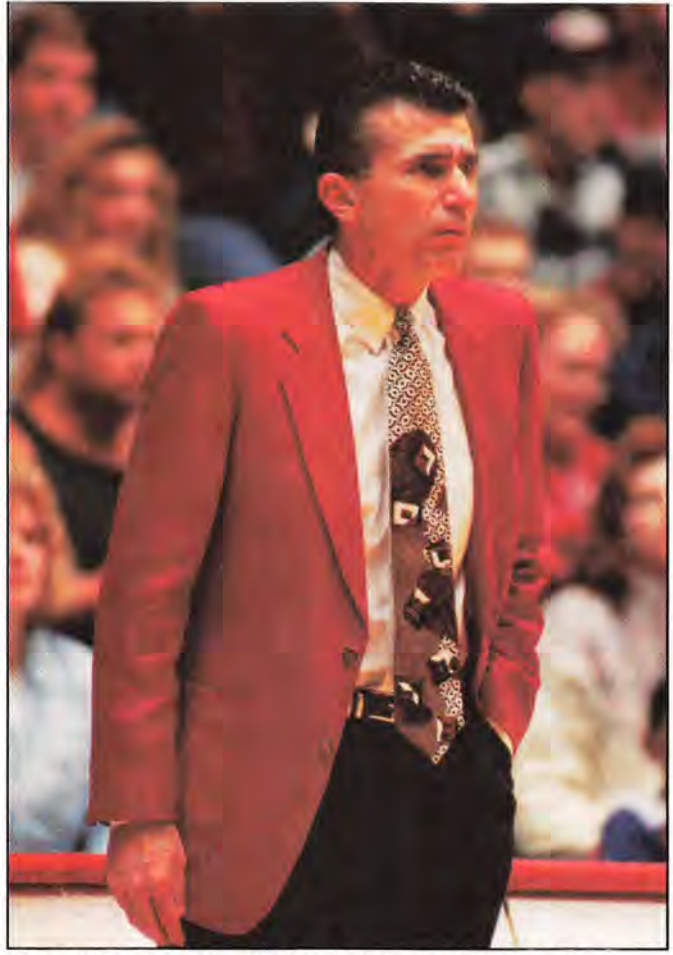
The comparisons become even more similar when you examine the post-season results. While the football team has not won a bowl game in its last seven attempts, Nee's teams have yet to win any of their first-round NCAA tournament games.

But unlike the football team, any clamoring by Husker fans to win an NCAA tournament game has not made Nee's ears sear just yet.

"I don't feel any pressure. The way I look at it is expectations. I think the fans' expectations have risen," he says.

Led by Eric Piatkowski, the anticipation level reached an all-time fervor last year as the Huskers went on a Cinderella trip through the Big Eight tournament. On the way, Piatkowski collected honorable mention All-American honors, scored a school and tournament-record 42 points against Oklahoma in a first round tournament game, and received a host of other accolades that led to his selection in the first round of last summer's NBA draft.

With their second-leading scorer in school history gone, along with starting forward Bruce Chubick and some-time starting point guard Jamar Johnson, the Huskers had good reason to raise their expectations.



Coach Danny Nee looks to improve in 1995.

Say that again?

"Granted, Eric was a great player but there were games last year when he wasn't on and other people like myself had to step up their games," says junior guard Erick Strickland.

"There's no doubt we can challenge for the Big Eight title," junior guard Jaron Boone says. "We have the experience and the greatest coaching staff. We just have to come out every night and be ready to play."

Picked to finish fourth in a Big Eight conference preseason poll of writers and sportscasters, the Huskers return two starters and six letterwinners from last year's 20-10 team. Those six returnees provided 46 percent of the team's scoring and 44 percent of the rebounding.

However, only one of the six is a senior. In Melvin Brooks, the Huskers have a 6-foot-8, 235-pound forward who chips in his fair share of points (4.8) and rebounds (4.3) while giving the regulars a rest. Joining him in that role will be junior guard Jason Glock, one of six native Nebraskans on this year's team. Glock appeared in 20 games, averaging 13.5 minutes and 4.3 points a game.

The task of replacing Piatkowski's presence will rest on the shoulders of a trio of marquee players—all of them juniors—who already have drawn more than their share of attention the past two years.

Boone, the son of former NBA great Ron Boone, headlines this trio. A member of the Big Eight All-Tournament team, the 6-foot-6, 191-pounder started 28 of 30 games last year and was NU's second-leading scorer with a 12.2 average.

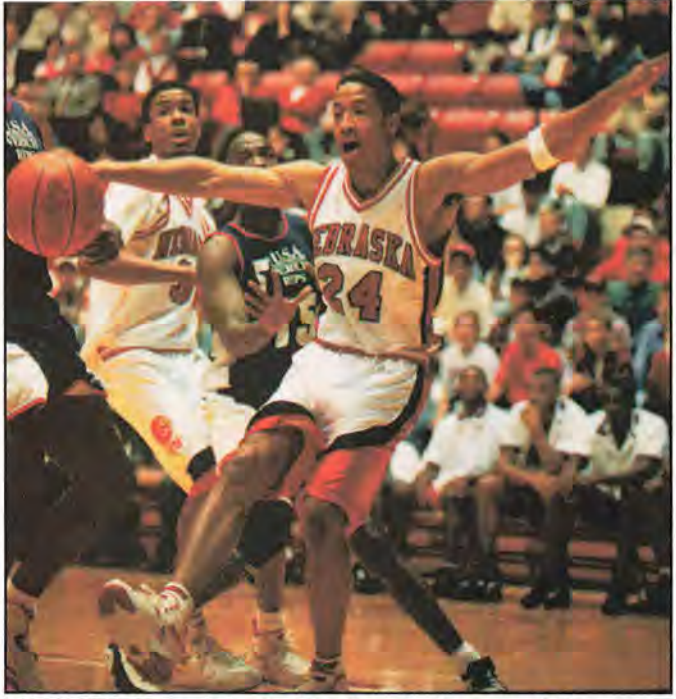
Although he's expected to be a leader, Boone ducks comparisons to other former Husker basketball standouts and looks upon his role as a shared one. "I think everybody will contribute in their own specific role within the team concept," he says. "No one will have to step up individually and get 40 points a night with this year's team. If everybody gets 10 points here and seven rebounds there, that's enough stepping stones to get us closer to wins each game."

Joining him as NU's other returning starter is Terrance Badgett, a 6-foot-6, 205-pound junior forward out of Omaha South who drew 16 starts and averaged 8.6 points and 4.6 rebounds in 29 games last season. After a redshirt season his freshman year, Badgett drew attention for his versatility on both ends of the floor.

The third—and NU's only other returning double-figure scorer—is Strickland, who has accomplished nearly as much at NU as he has on the baseball diamond in the Florida Marlins' minor league system. After spending the last two summers with the Marlins, the Bellevue West graduate opted to spend this summer in Lincoln working out on the hardwood.

"Mentally and physically, I feel like I'm ready to get things going," he says. "I'm looking forward to having a more complete season.

Strickland will be relied upon the most to fuel NU's defensive attack. Only seven teams shot 50 percent or better from the field against the Huskers last season. Last year, Strickland led the team in



Big 8 All Tournament selection junior guard Jaron Boone will provide new leadership for the Huskers.

steals in 13 games while reaching double figures in scoring 19 times. He also has the shooting range to bury an occasional three-pointer, too, having sank 73 of them during the past two seasons.

Among the three, there may be more than one first-team All-Big Eight selection, Nee says.

"They will have to all step their games up a level, but it's their time now," he says. "They've paid their dues and waited their turn."

What those three couldn't provide was what Nee went searching for last spring. Foremost on his recruiting agenda was the search for a center to shore up the Huskers' lack of presence in the middle. Last year, relying on a pair of converted forwards (seniors Tom Best and Chubick), NU didn't fare well in the rough-or-be-roughed-up Big Eight conference games.

Word quickly spread through the conference ranks: Put the clamps on Piatkowski, have your way in the middle and chalk up a win over the Huskers. That gap in the middle is almost certain to be filled by one of a host of newcomers whom Nee expects to make an immediate difference in the front and backcourt. At first glance, it would seem that Nee has raided the ranks of Osborne's offensive line to find a true center.

True freshman Leif Nelson stands 6-foot-11 and weighs a beefy 275 pounds. Chris Sallee, a transfer from South Mountain Community College in Phoenix, is 6-foot-10, 235 pounds. A returning player and crowd favorite last season, Mikki Moore has added a few extra pounds to his wiry frame and now checks in at 6-foot-11, 195 pounds.

"We've been lacking a little in the post the last couple years," Boone says. "This will give us some honesty in there and open up the perimeter a little more."

Sallee is one of five players in the Huskers' spring recruiting class who was recognized as one of the top 30 in the nation by several national recruiters. The Arizona native averaged 20.6 points and 13.7 rebounds at South Mountain after playing only one season of high school ball.

Nelson built his credentials at Arlington High School in Riverside, Calif., where he averaged 22.5 points and 15.6 rebounds his senior season while sinking 68 percent of his field-goal attempts.

Freshman Chester Surles, a 6-foot-7 guard out of Saginaw, Mich., could see significant playing time. Regarded as the top recruit of the class, Surles led his team to a 21-2 record while averaging 21 points, eight rebounds, six assists and three blocked shots a game.

"He's a very experienced player," Nee says. "We're very optimistic about him."

The two Nebraska recruits—forwards Chad Ideus of Adams and Ord's Andy Markowski—are probably destined for redshirt seasons, Nee says.

A sixth newcomer, junior Tom Wald, sat out last year after transferring from Mankato State. His off-season dedication to strength and conditioning won him the team's Ironman Award. A first-team All-North Central Conference selection as a sophomore the 6-foot guard averaged 13.1 points and shot 42 percent from three-point range.

Strickland says this year's crop of newcomers brought a refreshingly good work ethic to preseason practices. "The fact that they've worked so hard is a compliment to them. They work as hard as any of the veterans."

To some players on last year's team, the words "team unity" were a catchphrase thrown into post-game interviews whenever the Huskers won a close one. After a string of four losses to open the Big Eight season, though, the only thing unifying the Huskers was the red on their uniforms. Accusations of "lack of hustle" and "selfishness" flew around the locker-room as NU endured its longest losing stretch in the five years.

But, as the Huskers found out, winning a Big Eight tournament title can quickly change all that.

A unity council was formed. The off-court activities that sometimes drew the team together last year—a few rounds of miniature golf, pool or a night at the movies—suddenly drew 100 percent attendance.

"We finally have a loving-type relationship," Strickland says. "We think that's going to carry us a long ways."

"Without team unity, we have nothing," Nee says. "It starts with unity. That unity is trust, cooperation, communication, singleness of purpose. Everything we do is toward making us a winner." ■

Junior Terrance Badgett of Omaha South High School

University of Nebraska

Women's Basketball '94 '95

SCHEDULE

MONTH/DATE	DAY	OPPONENT	LOCATION	TIME
Nov. 2	Wed.	Athletes in Action	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Nov. 20	Sun.	Puerto Rican National	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Nov. 25-26		CableVision Classic	Lincoln, NE	
	Fri.	Nebraska vs. BYU		6:00 pm
		Indiana vs. SMU		8:00 pm
	Sat.	Consolation		1:00 pm
		Championship		3:00 pm
Nov. 28	Mon.	Northwestern State	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Nov. 30	Wed.	Kent State	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Dec. 3-4		Duke Invitational	Durham, NC	
	Sat.	Nebraska vs. Indiana St.		1:00 pm
		Duke vs. UW-Milwaukee		3:00 pm
	Sun.	Consolation		1:00 pm
		Championship		3:00 pm
Dec. 6	Tues.	Buffalo	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Dec. 8	Thurs.	Michigan	Ann Arbor, MI	7:30 pm
Dec. 10	Sat.	Bowling Green	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Dec. 18	Sun.	Northern Iowa	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Dec. 28	Wed.	Creighton	Omaha, NE	7:00 pm
Jan. 1	Sun.	Colgate	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Jan. 6	Fri.	Kansas State	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Jan. 8	Sun.	Kansas	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Jan. 13	Fri.	Oklahoma	Norman, OK	7:00 pm
Jan. 15	Sun.	Oklahoma State	Stillwater, OK	2:00 pm
Jan. 20	Fri.	Missouri	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Jan. 22	Sun.	Colorado	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Jan. 29	Sun.	Iowa State	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Feb. 3	Fri.	Kansas	Lawrence, KS	7:00 pm
Feb. 5	Sun.	Kansas State	Manhattan, KS	2:00 pm
Feb. 10	Fri.	Oklahoma State	Lincoln, NE	7:00 pm
Feb. 12	Sun.	Oklahoma	Lincoln, NE	2:00 pm
Feb. 17	Fri.	Colorado	Boulder, CO	7:00 pm
Feb. 19	Sun.	Missouri	Columbia, MO	2:00 pm
Feb. 26	Sun.	Iowa State	Ames, IA	2:00 pm
Mar. 4-6	Sat.-Mon.	Big Eight Tournament	Salina, KS	TBA

TICKETS ARE $2.00. CALL 472-3111 FOR TICKET INFORMATION. TIMES LISTED ARE LOCAL AT THE SITE OF THE CONTEST.

photos by Dennis Hubbard

Lady Huskers coach Angela Beck

THE WOR

Angela Beck's Huskers

by Nancy Lieberman-Cline

Listen in on a University of Nebraska women's basketball practice and you're sure to hear the voice. It's firm, confident and forceful.

The woman behind the voice is Angela Beck, the winningest coach in Husker women's basketball history.

In Beck's eight years at Nebraska, the Huskers' accomplishments include a 140-95 overall record, NCAA tournament appearances in 1988 and 1993, the Big Eight Conference title in 1988 and an average of nearly 18 wins per season.

The Husker program has had its share of talented athletes, including 1993 Wade Trophy winner Karen Jennings.

While the women's basketball program continues to improve, success hasn't come easily. Beck says long-term success is created by building from a solid foundation — and that comes through a quality support staff.

"You have to have all the components," says Beck, 1988 Big Eight Coach of the Year. "We had a separation, men's athletics on one side and women's athletics on the other."

Now, the two work together, she says.

Beck arrived at Nebraska and inherited a program with a large budget, but less tradition than other Husker programs. She took an aggressive approach to instill that tradition.

"My philosophy is you have to adapt your system to the players and not the players to the system."

Beck started to build that tradition from the bottom. Eight years ago, Nebraska's girls' basketball camp attracted 50 participants. Today, that number has swelled to more than 1,500 girls, all hungry to learn from Beck and her Husker players.

Nebraska also retooled its recruiting strategy, which once scanned both coasts looking for capable talent. Now, Beck and assistant coach Karin Nicholls focus mainly on the Midwest, including Texas, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska.

Beck also stresses academics with her players. She avoids recruiting athletes who aren't committed to their academics and success in the classroom. Beck's squads have never had an ineligible athlete, and she takes a strict approach to class attendance. That approach apparently is paying off as last season's squad had a combined 3.2 grade-point average.

This year's squad, comprised of seven juniors and six sophomores, have honed their skills practicing against Husker standouts from previous seasons, including Jennings, Nafeesah Brown, Meggan Yedsena and Rissa Taylor.

The group will have to compensate for the loss of Brown and Yedsena, who accounted for 41 percent of the Husker scoring last season, 40 percent of the rebounding and 35 percent of the assists. Last season, Brown became the eighth player in Big Eight history to lead the league in scoring and rebounding in the same season.

Last year's squad finished 17-13, with a 7-7 conference record. The Huskers finished strong, winning nine of their final 14 games. That stretch included a eight-point road loss to No. 12-ranked Kansas and a two-point loss to No. 3-ranked Colorado at home. The Husker season ended with a 77-67 Big Eight Tourney loss to Colorado in the semifinals.

This year's squad features more of a balanced scoring attack. Beck says she isn't sure who will emerge to lead the team.

One possibility is junior guard Kate Galligan, who led all returning players in scoring with a 10.8 average last season. Another is junior Pyra Aarden, a 6-foot-4 center, who led returning players in rebounding with 5.5 per game last season.

Other possibilities are sophomore Tina McClain, who averaged 5.8 points per game and 3.8 rebounds last season, and Roquella Brown, Nafeesah's sister.

The Huskers must again contend with Colorado and Kansas for conference honors. Each has an All-American candidate — Colorado's Shelley Sheetz and Kansas's Angela Aycock.

One thing Nebraska fans won't see is a long line of Huskers on the bench with Beck. With center Emily Thompson sidelined by injury, the Husker roster will sport just 11 players.

"The numbers are right if we stay healthy," Beck says. ■

Sophomore Tina McClain adds to the Husker's balanced scoring attack.

D Is Out

Keep the Tradition Alive

Sports Bars

Where Everybody Loves Your Team

by Tim McMahan

It is kneeling room only inside E's Hideaway. Standing certainly is out of the question. Just try it and see what happens.

"Hey! Hey you! Sit down! I can't see the play!"

So patrons kneel, right into a puddle of freshly spilled beer. But at least no one's heckling the intruders now. They're too busy screaming at the big screen, cheering on their team. The action intensifies—a huge gain for the crowd favorite.

The crowd explodes! Thunderous "all rights" and high-fives cross the room like the wave, and even a few mock headbutts occur as fans grab for their beers and eagerly cry: "Did you see that! Did you see that!"

What team could possibly be the recipient of such cult-like adoration? The Nebraska Cornhuskers, maybe? Nope. Try the Green Bay Packers. Though there's really nothing official about it, E's at 322 S. 72nd St. in Omaha, has become a home away from home for Packers fans.

The place is a shrine to Green Bay. The corner of the bar that houses the beloved big screen is festooned with Green Bay pennants, banners, you name it. Lovingly framed photos of Packers teams and heroes from years past adorn the walls.

"This is how we decided to spend our first anniversary," yells Matt Nyren, proudly wearing a Packers jersey with quarterback Brett Farve's No. 4 on the back. "That's my wife, Michelle, right there," he says, pointing, "and my mom next to her and my little sister. Being a Packers fan runs in the family. I'm 24 and I've been coming here since I was 16. I'm from Green Bay, so it's just like being back home. This is awesome."

Meanwhile, a few miles south in Bellevue at D.J.'s Dugout, 25th and Cornhusker, another 75-plus fans, wearing orange and white, are chanting "C'mon D. Let's go." The crowd erupts as a Cleveland Browns' defender breaks through and administers a vicious sack. They graciously applaud the stellar effort.

D.J.'s Dugout is the official home of the Cleveland Browns' Backers, perhaps the largest pro football fan club in Omaha. Club members meet religiously every Sunday during football season, not only to watch the Browns, but to scream and stomp their team to victory.

The gatherings at both taverns, and numerous others across Nebraska, point to a new trend in sports patronage. In towns without the finances and facilities to host an NFL team, bars with pro-team affiliations are becoming the next best thing to being at the stadium. Where else can a fan be with other like-minded faithful who understand their devotion to a team located hundreds of miles away?

"I've always been a Browns fan...a die-hard fan," says Ron Distransky, president of the Omaha Chapter of the Browns' Backers. "I enjoy the camaraderie, the enthusiasm. It's like being in the Dawg Pound (Cleveland Stadium)."

On the other hand: "I wasn't always a Cleveland fan," says Distransky's wife, Connie, kneeling next to the table and clutching an armful of Browns floor mats to be raffled off at halftime. "When we started meeting here, we were lucky to get five or 10 people to show up. Now we average 50 to 55 on a given Sunday. It's like a family gathering. I know just about everyone here."

DJ's Dugout owner Darwin Hanssen has to love it. The Browns' Backers has meant guaranteed business every Sunday in autumn since he bought the bar in 1990. "My situation is unique, because of Offutt Air Force Base," he says. "I show every NFL game here, but I can always expect a large crowd of Browns' Backers week in and week out."

Hanssen helps facilitate the fan activity by advertising the club in the local newspaper and by hosting five tailgate parties a year in his parking lot. Even in the depths of a Nebraska winter, Browns fans huddle together on the blacktop while eating steaming hot dogs and trading memories of past seasons.

One would think Hanssen would have become a Browns fan by now. "Actually, I follow the Vikings," he says.

He better not tell that to Jimmy

Vasil, perhaps the most outgoing and vocal backer of the bunch. "I'm tired of the lack of respect," he says, wearing Bernie Kosar's old No. 19. "We're going to the Super Bowl. We've got a lot of weapons that no one gives us credit for. We've got the talent. There's no reason why we can't go all the way!"

Not to start a fight, but there's a whole room full of Green Bay fans back at E's who think otherwise. Things don't look as hopeful for the Pack, who have lost several early season games.

"For the rest of the year, we're just going to open up the offense," says Ed Evezic, who wears Reggie White's No. 92 jersey. "We'll win the Central Division and the NFC Championship game. If we can get past that, we will in the Super Bowl. The AFC is the minor league of pro football."

Despite the different points of view, there's one thing most of these fans have in common: Few are Omaha natives. Most hail from cities and small towns that neighbor their beloved franchise teams. Rick English, owner of E's Hideaway, says most of the fans who show up on Sunday are from Wisconsin.

"Don't ask me why," he says. "I been doing this for about eight years. What started with two or three guys turned into eight or 10 and then just snowballed. And this was back when the Packers weren't even any good. The Green Bay fans come in because they want to be by Green Bay people."

photos by Eric Francis

Tom Viau, who also wears Green Bay jersey No. 92, is a native of Grand Rapids, Mich. When he was transferred to Omaha with the Air Force, he became separated from the fan-base he grew up with. "I found out about this place from a classified in The Packer Report (a national fan publication). It said, 'Help, I'm moving to Omaha. Where can I watch the Packers?' I called the guy to find out what he found out, and here I am."

Today, Viau is joined by his brother and sister-in-law, Greg and Roberta Viau, who are visiting for the weekend. "We heard a lot about this place, and we just had to see it," Roberta said. "We don't even have any Green Bay bars in Grand Rapids. This is a real novelty."

Distransky says most of the Browns Backers have similar stories. Most fans heard about the weekly gatherings either by word-of-mouth, advertising, or from Browns News Illustrated. People like Bob Lepley. "I grew up about 60 miles outside of Cleveland and have lived in Omaha two years," Lepley said. "I'm here every week. It alleviates the home sickness."

"Most everyone here has lived in Ohio," says Jeff Kane, proudly wearing former Brown Clay Matthews' No. 57. "I'm from Ohio, too. I've lived in Omaha for four years. The nice thing about this is that it brings together people from all walks of life that have something in common. I mean, this game today, Cleveland vs. Cincinnati — it's the battle of Ohio—a huge rivalry. You know they're going crazy back home. I've gone to a lot of games in that stadium. Wish I was there today."

A Youngstown, Ohio, native, Distransky says he knows the value of having a haven for fellow Buckeyes to meet and reminisce about home. Certainly it's an important motivation for putting in the long hours needed to keep the club alive.

"Yeah, keeping it going is like a part-time job," he says. Suddenly Cleveland scores for the first time in the game, setting off a roar of cheers. "But just look around. Listen to the crowd. I think it's worth it." ■

Calling All Fans

Here's a list of some Omaha taverns with NFL team affiliations. Not all have satellite dishes so you may want to call ahead and find out if they'll be showing the game. If you know of any other establishments in Nebraska where fans meet to cheer on their favorite team, drop us a line at Nebraska Sports Magazine.

BEER CITY, 4147 L St., 733-4782.... Dallas Cowboys
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DREAMER'S, 2666 No. 90th St., 391-1150.... Kansas City Chiefs
E'S HIDEAWAY, 322 So. 72nd St, 391-4246.....Green Bay Packers
PAT AND MIKE'S, 9136 Bedford Ave., 571-3182....Kansas City Chiefs
RAY'S ORIGINAL BUFFALO WINGS, 5415 So. 96th St., 593-9323..... Buffalo Bills
RUMORS, Fort Crook Rd., Bellevue, 291-4600.....Chicago Bears
W.C.'S PLACE, 3520 F St., 734-9089..... Minnesota Vikings

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IF YOU GET IT, GET IT.

Racers Here to Stay

New Season to Showcase Potent Offense

by Kevin Warneke

This season, the only moving Mike Thibault has worried about is getting his Omaha Racers up and down the court.

Last year was different. Shortly before the Racers captured the 1993 Continental Basketball Association championship, owner Steve Idelman announced the team was headed out of town if season ticket sales didn't improve. Idelman warned the Racers needed to reach 3,500 in total season-ticket sales or the franchise would leave Omaha.

Idelman eventually announced the Racers would stay, even thought the sales efforts fell short. This year, Thibault says, there was no question about where the Racers would be playing.

"Steve made an early decision last spring that the Racers would stay," he says. "We're still not out of the woods financially — we're still striving to break even. We've seen improvement. The decision to stay certainly alleviated the distractions from the media."

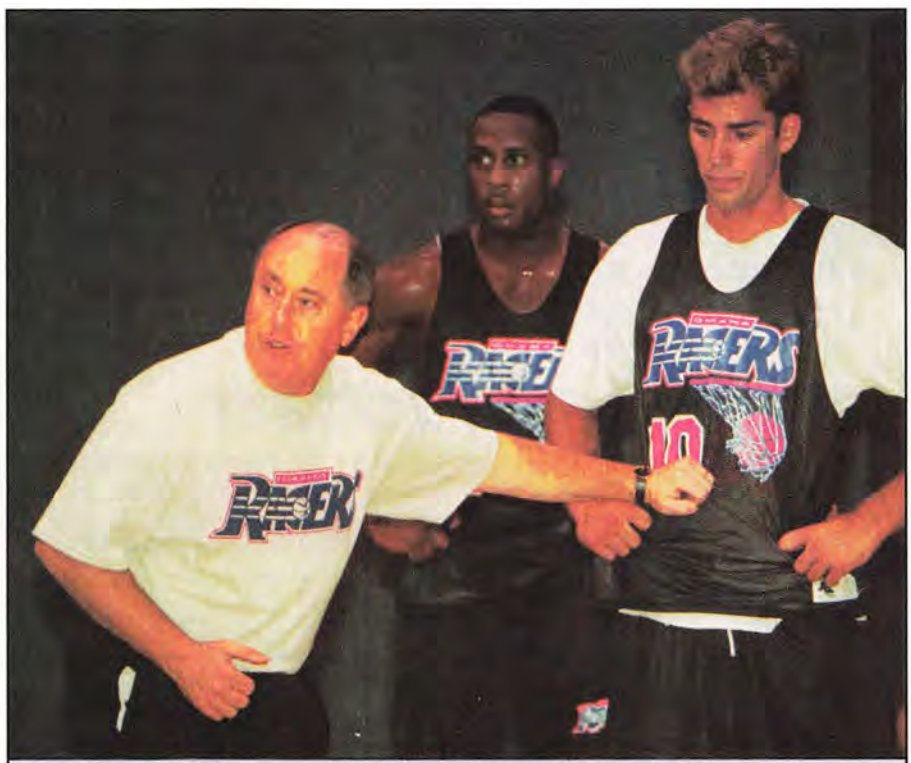
That means Thibault can talk about depth, conditioning and balanced scoring, rather than the bottom line.

"It's nice to have business as usual."

Thibault's business these days is getting the Racers off to a quick start. The last two seasons, the Racers have limped through the early season, only to catch fire just in time to make the playoffs.

"I certainly think we had the depth in our training camp this year to have one of the best teams we've had," Thibault says.

Jerome Coles, a 6-foot-6 forward out of Norfolk State, says a quick start could boost early attendance. He says the Racers have the potential to be explosive.



Coach's Job Not Always Fun

With one exception, Racers coach Mike Thibault figures he has the perfect job.

He just doesn't like having to decide who stays with the team and who gets cut. Telling a player he's been cut is the worst.

"It's the most difficult part of the job, without a question. It's the part I hate the most," he says.

When bringing bad news, Thibault says, he tells the player the decision may or may not be correct, but it's one that's best for the Racers. "Sometimes, it comes back to haunt you," he says.

Thibault tells the story of Paul "Snoopy" Graham, the Racers' first-round draft pick in their inaugural season in Omaha (1989-90). Graham finished his senior season at Ohio University by averaging 22 points a game, but reported to camp overweight and out of shape. Thibault cut him.

"He was probably shocked when we cut him," Thibault says. A year later, Graham made the Albany team that won 50 games, and eventually made it the NBA.

"He called me and thanked me for waking him up," Thibault says. "He said 'You were the first coach who cut me. You were the first coach who ever told me what it took to be a pro.'

"In hindsight, you think: How stupid can you be to cut Paul Graham? Paul Graham wasn't ready to play when he came here, and that happens."

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"It's up to us to give the fans something to cheer for. It's up to us to get them into the game," Coles says.

Depth and conditioning could be two keys to getting the Racers off to that fast start. Thibault guaranteed the Racers would have the depth by stockpiling players during the offseason. "Guys were coming out of the woodwork wanting to play for us. Our problem was getting down to the 18 guys we could invite to veterans' camp," he says.

As for conditioning, Thibault told his players to be in shape when they reported to camp. Thibault promised to take care of the rest. "We will be the best conditioned team in this league by far."

If basketball fans want offense, the Racers are their team. The Racers have led the CBA in scoring three of the past five seasons. Last year, the Racers averaged 111.9 points per game — tops among teams in the CBA, NBA and NCAA divisions I and II.

The 111.9 points-per-game average pales, however, when compared with the Racers' scoring clip in 1990-91. That year, behind Cedric Hunter and Jim Les, the Racers averaged 125 points per game.

The Racers call their potent offense a "fast track attack." That's fine, says Coles. An explosive offense means Racer players get a chance to showcase their talents and grab the attention of NBA scouts. The Racer players benefit, Coles says, and so do their fans.

"A fast offense is good for the fans because it makes the game more exciting," he says. "We play up and down. We try to run the ball every chance we get."

"We want to be an exciting, hard-working team," Thibault says. "We want fans to identify with our team."

Don't look for one player to carry the Racers' offensive load this season. Thibault says it's nice to have one player who steps up each time the game is on the line, but it's not necessary.

Thibault is satisfied with spreading the points around. Three of the past five seasons, the Racers' roster has featured seven players scoring in double figures.

"I don't think you need to have a dominant scorer as long as you have guys who are willing to pass the ball," Thibault says.

While Thibault talks about scoring parity, he's doesn't mind that the Racer roster features several players capable of having big scoring nights. He calls them go-to guys.

"You have one go-to guy right away," Thibault says about Sean Gay. Gay averaged 17 points-per-game last season.

Then there's Coles, who averaged 12 points per game during the regular season, but more than 16 during the playoffs.

"By the end of the year he had become a go-to guy."

Finally, there's Sebastian Neal, traded to the Racers last February. He averaged 15 points per game during the playoffs. ■

Missouri standout Melvin Booker (13) joins the Racers along with Sebastian Neal (33) of Oral Roberts

Racers' NBA Connection

Add Jim Thomas' name to the list of Omaha Racer alumni who have moved on to the National Basketball Association.

Thomas' name, however, belongs on a different list than the one that includes nine Racers who have earned promotions to the NBA while playing in Omaha.

Thomas, named 1993 CBA Championship Series MVP, returned to the NBA this season as a scout for the Toronto Raptors expansion team. His responsibilities include scouting in the southern and eastern regions of the United States.

"I get to watch a lot of basketball," says Thomas, who played parts of four seasons in the NBA and six in the CBA. "I'm just not playing in them. It's quite enjoyable."

Mike Thibault says he has two goals as coach of the Omaha Racers: to win games, and help his players improve and earn promotions to the NBA or contracts with professional teams overseas.

Although losing someone to the NBA can disrupt the Racers' lineup, especially at playoff time, Thibault says he's happy for his players when it happens.

"That's what we're here for," he says.

Thomas, who played last season in Spain, had hoped to join former Racers Tim Legler, Jim Les, Brian Howard and others who have received NBA call-ups while playing in Omaha. At age 32, Thomas averaged 17 points for the Racers during the 1992-93 season. He averaged 22 points per game in the 16 playoff games en route to the Racers championship. Still, the phone didn't ring.

"The NBA often overlooks guys in their 30s. They think if they haven't made it by now, they've played their best basketball," Thomas said. "That's not always true."

Eric Piatkowski's California Dream

by Kenneth J. Kreiker

It's Monday night and for most of America it's time to turn out the lights because the party's over. The late night news has come and gone and what remains of the day is left to muddle through the final moments of another Monday Night Football yawner.

While those east of the Rockies have resigned to memories, sweet dreams or Late Night with David Letterman, in Los Angeles the sun is slowly setting. For Eric Piatkowski, life in the National Basketball Association has just begun.

Piatkowski, the former University of Nebraska standout, has just completed his first full week of two-a-day preseason practices with the Los Angeles Clippers. It's 8:45 p.m. in California, and he's just settled down for a room-service supper in the Four Seasons Hotel.

It's been a grueling week for the 6-foot-7 rookie. After missing the first 10 days of training camp as a holdout, Piatkowski returned to the court with a fatter wallet and a keener sense of the NBA game. Nestled in his hotel room on this Monday night, Piatkowski is tired, but upbeat. He's willing to talk—as soon as he finishes his supper.

"They're going great, actually," he says of the practices. "I think the first couple of days I got in here I felt out of it. Today was by far my best practice. Everyday I feel better and better. Things are going better for me."

Piatkowski readily admits the holdout hindered his early performances. But even prior to that development, fear of injury kept him from the game but not off the court. Rather than risk an injury that could minimize his appeal in the NBA draft, he opted instead to work out on his own, keeping himself physically conditioned and his vaunted shooting eye intact. The strategy worked.

In last June's NBA draft, the Indiana Pacers made Piatkowski the 15th selection overall, then promptly shuffled him, along with Pooh Richardson and Malik Sealy to the Clippers for Mark Jackson and the draft rights to rookie Greg Minor.

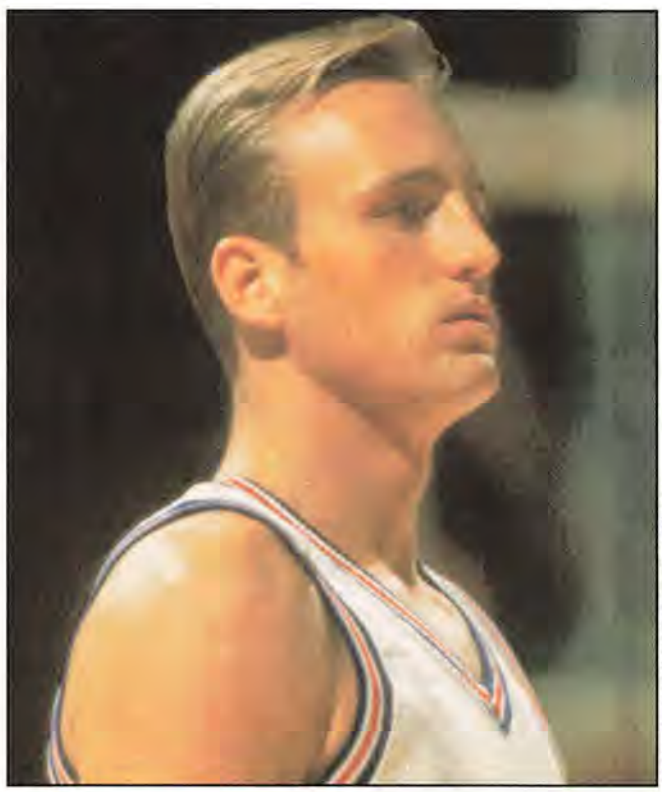


Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Clippers

"I thought that he might even go higher," Eric's father Walt says. "Eric really impressed a lot of guys."

Perhaps the two most memorable performances of Eric's career occurred last spring. In front of 23 NBA scouts in the opening round of the Big Eight Conference Tournament, Eric poured in a school and tournament record 42 points against Oklahoma. His second attention grabber came in the Phoenix Desert Classic, a tournament that features the top 40 players entering the NBA draft. Not only did Eric walk away with the tournament's Most Valuable Player award, averaging 22 points and shooting 63 percent, but his effort prompted what Walt calls "the shot heard round the country."

Following his MVP performance, Clipper head coach Bill Fitch compared Eric's potential to former Boston Celtic great and future Hall-of-Famer Larry Bird. Fitch knew Bird well, having coached him four seasons at Boston.

"He's got a lot of Bird's mannerisms," Fitch says. "To compare anybody's game to Bird is an injustice to the person that you do it to. I didn't mean to put a label on him that way. But he's got a lot of Bird's qualities to practice and work hard."

There's no doubt that Fitch knows basketball, having made his coaching mark with Cleveland, Boston, New Jersey, Houston and now the Clippers. But Larry Bird?

It's a great compliment," Eric says. "But, I'm still a rookie right now. I show flashes every now and then of some good things. But I still have some work ahead of me."

Family Ties

In tracing Eric's basketball beginnings, it seems only natural that he find himself these days gracing the same court with the world's finest players. His roots, after all, were planted in some rich and fertile soil.

His father, for instance, enjoyed a distinguished collegiate career at Bowling Green where he scored more than 1,500 points in a three-year career and led the Falcons to their last NCAA Tournament appearance. He later went on to play three years with Denver, Kentucky and Florida in the now-defunct American Basketball Association, and was selected to the ABA's all-rookie team—a spot shared with former Omahan Ron Boone, father of Eric's former Husker teammate Jaron Boone.

Fitch is familiar with the Piatkowski family, having coached Walt in his senior year at Bowling Green and now as the mentor in Eric's blossoming career. Inevitably, the coincidence leads to another comparison - between Eric and his dad.

"He (Walt) was a lot better shooter than Eric," Fitch says. "He was a shooter and a competitor. I think Eric got a lot of that from him."

The Piatkowski family certainly makes a case for the adage that the family that plays together stays together. Besides Eric, oldest brother David competed at Hastings College, while Sean currently plays for Bakersfield Junior College in California. And Troy, the youngest, is being heavily recruited by Oregon University. His father touts Troy as "the best high school basketball player in South Dakota" these days.

Walt, however, remains modest in the assessment of his input. "I just created an intent and they took it from there," he says. "We gave them a hint at a lot of different things and they took advantage of it. From our concept as a family we spent an awful lot of money and time giving them the exposure that they needed to get."

And when opportunity knocked, Eric answered. Although as a youngster the sheen of the NBA court had yet to catch his eye, he was already setting

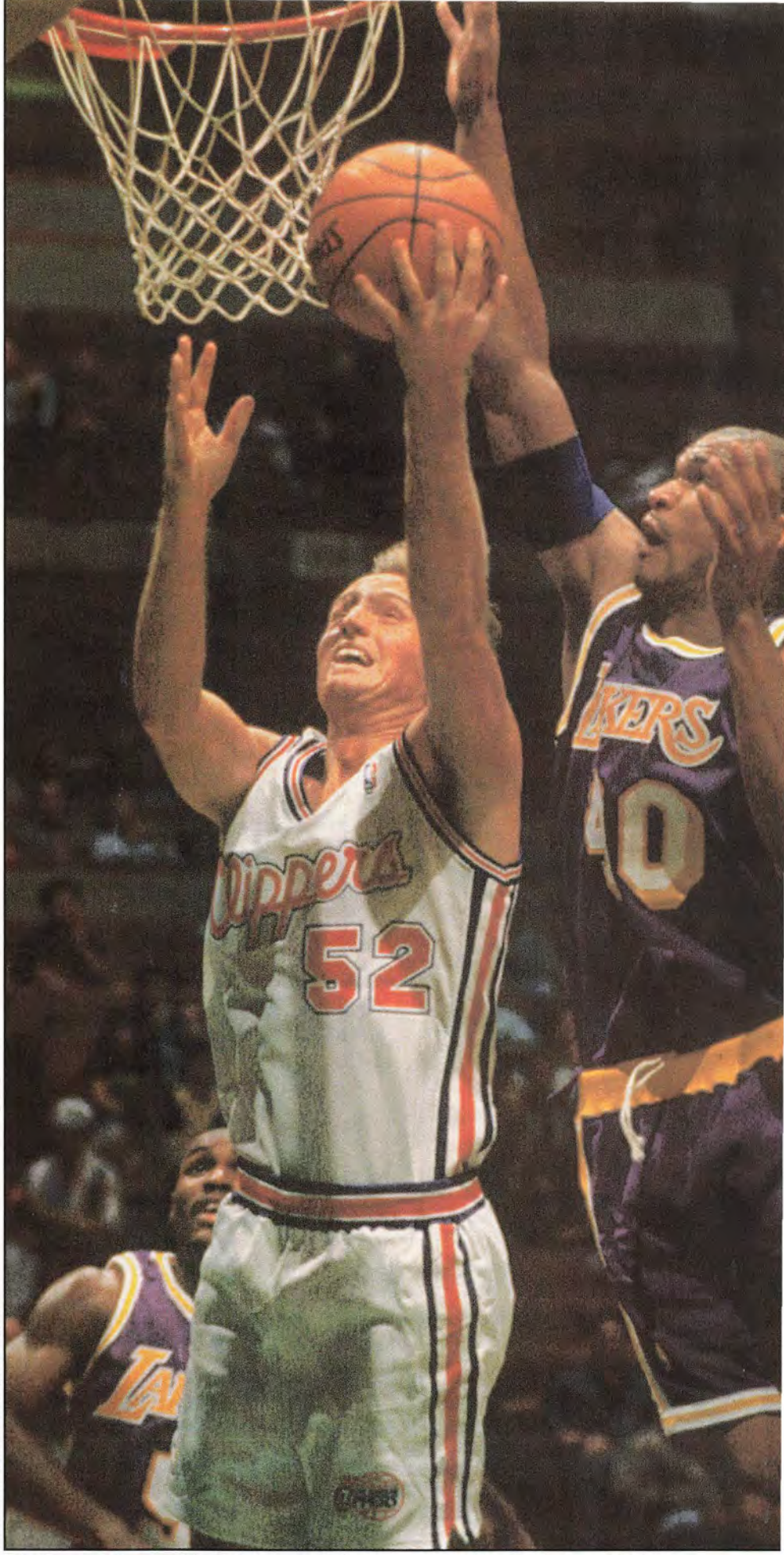


Photo courtesy of the Los Angeles Clippers

Piatkowski says his 10-day training camp holdout hindered his preseason performance.

the groundwork for show time. In sixth grade, for example, Eric came home one day in Scottsbluff and announced his intentions on entering the local Elk's Club Hoop-Shoot free-throw contest. It turned out to be an indication of things to come.

With his mother Lynne retrieving his rebounds, Eric practiced shooting between 300 to 400 free throws each day at the local YMCA. Practice made near perfect. After winning the local competition he went on to take the Nebraska regional and state titles. Although he failed to reach the national finals in Indianapolis that year, he returned the following two years, and eventually challenged for the national championship before losing in a sudden-death shoot-off.

His competitive drive wasn't limited strictly to free-throw contests. At basketball camps Eric was equally as focused where his goal became making a positive impression. And nearly all of the time he succeeded.

"If there were 10 awards I could win then that's what I was going to do," he says. "My main goal was that I was going to win every one of their awards. When I went in I was out for blood from a very young age."

Commitment to Excellence

One of those first to notice Eric's taste for competition was former University of Wyoming head coach Jim Brandenburg. While attending one of the Cowboy camps, Walt says, Brandenburg approached Eric one day with the news that "Someday you're going to wear the brown and gold of Wyoming."

After moving from Scottsbluff to Rapid City, S.D., at the beginning of his sophomore year, Eric went on to serve Stevens High School well. He became the first sophomore in 17 years to be selected to the all-state team and, after earning the honor twice more, eventually led his school to the 1989 Class AA state title. That same year he was named the state's Mr. Basketball and finished with career averages of more than 22 points and 10 rebounds per game.

It was during an all-star camp in Princeton, N.J., however, that Eric learned of his value to the University of Nebraska program. Assistant coaches Gary Bargen and Lynn Mitchem introduced themselves. At the end of his junior year Eric committed to the Huskers.

"I knew Nebraska was where I wanted to go," he says. "I wanted to get that recruiting process out of the way. I wanted to enjoy my senior year."

His first two seasons at Nebraska represented more of a rollercoaster ride than a smooth sail. After being named to the All-Big Eight Freshman Team, Eric struggled his sophomore season. For the first time he heard the rumblings of criticism.

"There were a lot of people down on me after my sophomore year," he says. "There was some people that said I wasn't ever going to start here."

True to past form, Eric's competitiveness kicked into overdrive as he went on to earn All-Big Eight first team honors the next two seasons. He left the Husker program last year as the only player in school history to score 1,000 points, grab 600 rebounds and hand out 300 assists while becoming an honorable mention all-American pick.

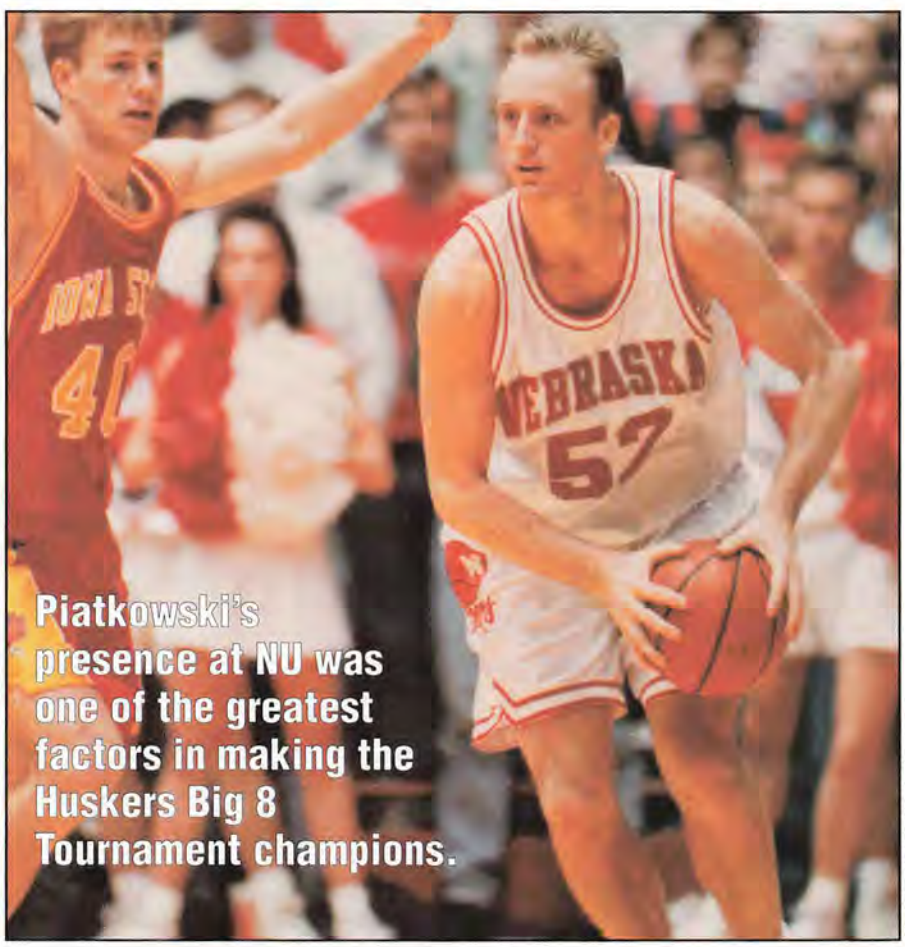
"I think he raised the Nebraska program to another level," Walt says of his son's accomplishments. "He commands the respect he got there."

Another Level

His contributions at the collegiate level are obvious. Eric's current focus, however, is more realistic as he learns the nuances of the pro game, and, like everyone else on the Clipper roster, competes for playing time.

Eric showed a flash of possible things to come canning his first 3-pointer 30 seconds into his pro debut. He made 1 of 3 shots that game and followed it with nine points the following contest.

"I'm relaxed," he says of his professional exposure. "I didn't have butterflies or any like that. Sometimes though, I'm thinking to myself and I get a big smile on my face. And I think I made it. I'm here. I don't mean to sound like that's end of it, or all I want. That's just the first step." ■



Piatkowski's presence at NU was one of the greatest factors in making the Huskers Big 8 Tournament champions.

photo by Dennis Hubbard

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Neil Smith Has His Eye on the Prize

by Nick Schinker

It happened 10 years ago, but Charlie McBride remembers it quite clearly.

He was watching film of a New Orleans high school football team. Jack Pierce, then the University of Nebraska off-campus recruiter for football, said he had a player he wanted McBride to see.

"I watched for a while, and there was this kid who kept popping into the picture, making the play," McBride recalls. "This kid was something else.

"He was tall and skinny and he could really move," says McBride, NU's defensive coordinator for the past 13 years.

McBride checked with the player's mother and found only Grambling State University had expressed interest in her son. He talked it over with Coach Tom Osborne.

"We had lost all the defensive linemen we were recruiting," McBride says. "We had nobody."

Though concerned about his weight, Nebraska decided to offer a scholarship to the 208-pound, all-area and all-district football and basketball player from McDonough 35 High School. They thought he had potential.

The gamble paid off big. They had signed Neil Smith.

"I was one lucky, blessed young man, and I believe that the Lord does his best for all of us," Smith says. "Still, I sit back and wonder sometimes, if they hadn't seen me on that film, where would I be today?"

Today, that tall, skinny kid weighs 273 pounds. He plays defensive end for the Kansas City Chiefs and earns an estimated $3 million a year. Last season, he led the National Football League in quarterback sacks with 15. Since 1989, he has averaged 66.4 tackles and 10.9 sacks a season, establishing him as one of the NFL's top defensive linemen.

Smith's biography in the Chiefs' media guide is three pages long. It's full of statistics and dates. But behind those numbers is a 28-year-old man who admits a strong belief in God and takes immense pride in being father to a 3-year-old girl, Nesha. Neil Smith is a man whom others say works as hard for his community as he does for his teammates.

"A lot of guys get to the NFL, make a bunch of money and run off to spend it," says Tom Pratt, the Chiefs' defensive line coach. "Neil's not like that. He's very conscious of family and proud of his daughter. And he's done an awful lot of charitable work in the community. He's a credit to the football team."

As national spokesperson for the "Yes I Can" Foundation, which encourages children with disabilities to reach their full potential, Smith makes countless appearances at area schools and youth clubs. He spends his days off the field talking about leadership and respect.

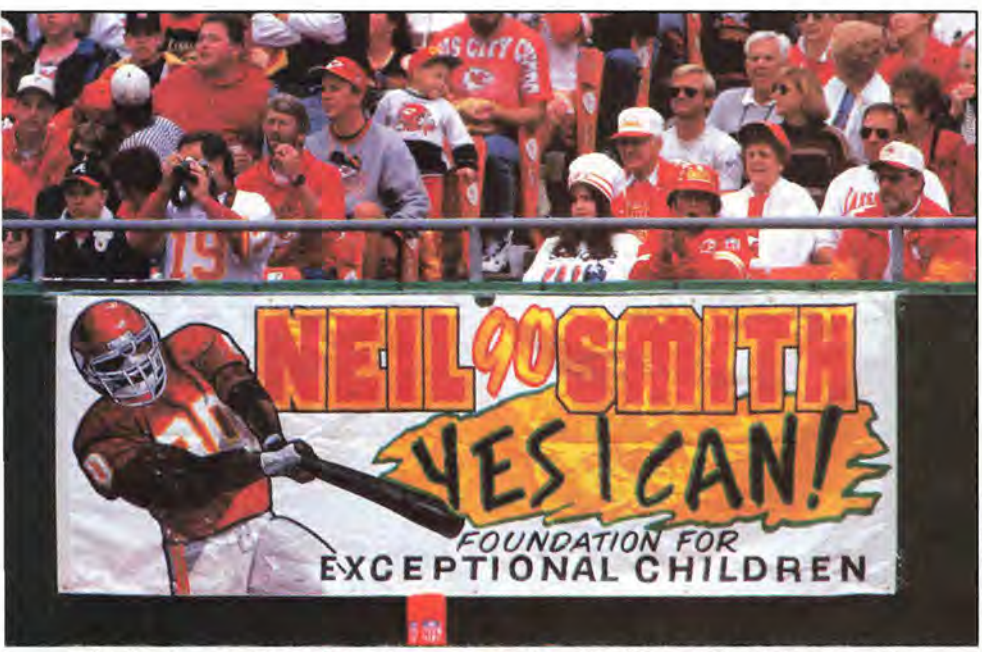
"My mother always preached to me to never be a follower, always be a leader," he says. "There's too many kids now who only want to be followers. I tell them that you've got to live your life but make your own decisions. If you think it's right, then it's right. It may still be wrong, but it's nobody's mistake but yours."

Back in college, Smith impressed McBride as "an unbelievable athlete who really had a lot of football intelligence. He's the kind of kid that you say to yourself as coach, he's made to be a football player."

When he came to Nebraska, Smith compensated for his lack of weight with unusual ability. At 6-foot-4 and with arms that measure 44-3/4 inches in length, he puts his 7-foot, 1-1/2 inch wingspan to good use and emerged as a fearsome pass rusher. He improved his vertical jump from 30 inches to 35 inches. He set the record as the fastest defensive lineman in NU history, 4.59 seconds over 40 yards. He put on pounds and muscle. In 1987, his senior year, Smith weighed in at 260 pounds and was voted lifter of the year by his teammates.

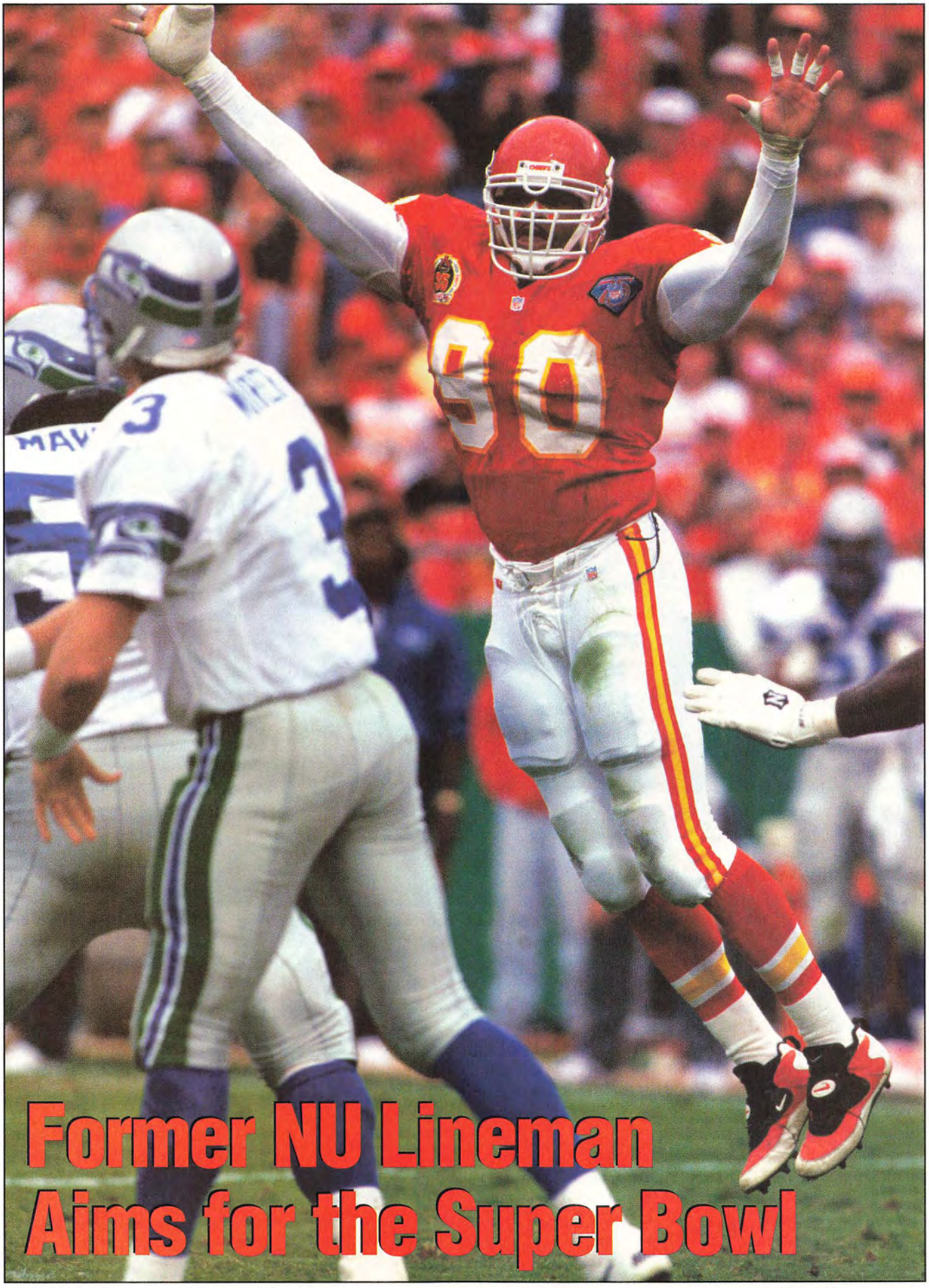
He finished his college career with honors as a first-team All-American pick of The Sporting News and second-team selection of the Associated Press and Football News. It was time to turn pro.

Kansas City chose him as its No. 1 pick in the 1988 NFL draft, making Smith the second player selected overall. After enduring a disappointing rookie season remembered more for injuries than solo tackles, "I think he



photos by Eric Francis

Smith is a national spokesperson for the "Yes I Can" Foundation which helps children with disabilities.



Former NU Lineman Aims for the Super Bowl

has matured 100 percent," Pratt says.

"He's one of the best I've had the pleasure to work with," says Pratt, now in his 32nd year as an NFL assistant coach. "He devotes himself in the off-season to conditioning, and he gets better every year as a pass rusher. He's got great strength and mobility. He and Derrick (All-Pro outside linebacker Derrick Thomas) really compliment each other. That's why we call them our bookends."

In six previous NFL seasons, Smith amassed 332 tackles, 54-1/2 sacks, 17 forced fumbles and 11 fumble recoveries. His work has earned him three consecutive appearances in the Pro Bowl.

This season, however, the Chiefs' defensive co-captain injured an ankle in a game at New Orleans against the Saints. Four weeks later, he underwent surgery to support ligaments in his right thumb, leaving him with a bulky cast that limited his pass rushing ability.

"I haven't been up to the level of play where I want to be," he says. "But being injured, well, that's been known to happen in my business."

Despite where he's gone, Smith remembers where it all began. He speaks fondly of his playing days in Lincoln at Memorial Stadium and of Tom Osborne.

"He's a great coach, but he's also a great motivator and a great guy," Smith says. "He really taught me about life. I'd love to see Coach Osborne get the national championship. It would be well-deserved."

Each fall, he keeps his NU connections active by attending at least one Husker game. This year, the surgery during the Chiefs' off week prevented a personal appearance. "So I sent Will Shields (fellow ex-Husker also with the Chiefs) in my place."

The difference between playing at college and in the NFL, Smith says, is the respect a player must show and earn.

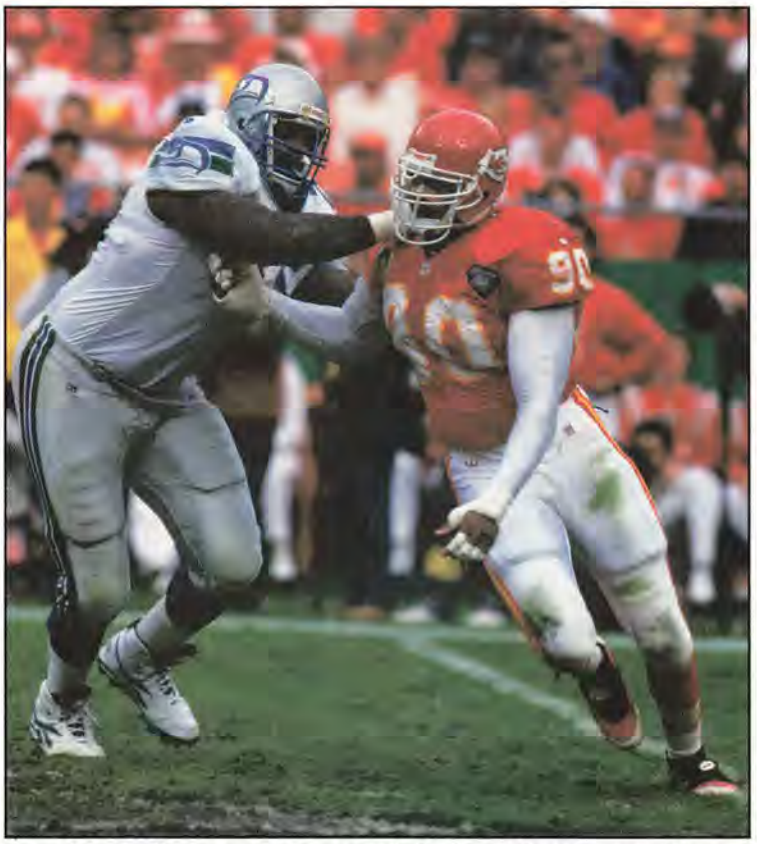
"You have to have respect in the NFL. In college ball, you could go out and if you were a big, physical player, you could take over the game. In the NFL, everybody's good."

Athletic ability is only part of the game, he says. An NFL player has to be entertaining. Smith's trademarks include a home-run style baseball swing after sacking a quarterback. It's a salute to his friend, former Kansas City Royal slugger George Brett. And there's the "Neil Nose," the colorful patch he's worn across the bridge of his nose ever since breaking it last season. The "Neil Nose" has caught on and is being marketed to fans who wear them every home game. His mother and other relatives even wore them to the New Orleans game.

"I think that's a great compliment."

Smith has been quoted saying he wanted to play in the NFL at least 10 years, "and I think that's definitely still my goal. I've been in this business a long time, longer than anyone thought I'd be here. But I once heard it said that Nebraska players don't last long in the pros; that the NU program was too physical and that they only lasted three or four years before getting burned out. I didn't feel like that back then and I still don't. I think the Nebraska program made me a better pro. It made me work harder."

Before he retires, he'd like to wear the ring of a Super Bowl champion. "I won the MVP two years ago here and I was named a Player-of-the-Month," he says. "I was into a little bit of everything,– sacks, forcing fumbles,– and I think in that period I was probably playing my best ball ever. To lead the NFL in sacks in '93 was a great feeling, and it earned me some respect. Still, I feel I have got to get something more out of it. I've got to get a ring."



Despite Smith's early-season injuries, his pass rushing abilities continue to excel.

Smith says he's happy in Kansas City and thinks the Chiefs, especially with Joe Montana at quarterback, have a shot at a Super Bowl trophy. But he wasn't always a Chiefs fan. "I grew up being a Dallas Cowboy fan," he recalls. "I grew up idolizing Ed 'Too Tall' Jones. When we'd pick teams and play football, I'd always be 'Too Tall' Jones."

He also remembers not always having the things he wanted, and it fuels his desire to make life better for his daughter.

"When she was born, I held her head in my hand and she didn't even reach to my bicep. It's special, watching her grow. She constantly amazes me," he says. "I want things to be different for her. She's who I'm working for right now."

How would he like his daughter, and his fans, to remember Neil Smith?

"I just want to be remembered as a guy that when it came down to work, I respected it," he says, "and when it came down to other people, I respected them, too." ■

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A Tradition All Their Own

by Chuck Green

This May be Big Red Country, but Wayne State is Marking its Territory

photos by Darin Epperly

Fall Saturdays in Wayne have become sacred days for football fans living in this northeast Nebraska community.

For those lucky enough to have game tickets to watch the Wayne State Wildcats play, there is plenty to see and do. There are colorful outfits and tailgate parties and lots of cheering. For those without tickets, the action can be monitored by radio.

Remember, these colors aren't scarlet and cream, the tailgate parties aren't in Lincoln, and Kent Pavelka's voice isn't the one blasting out of transistor radios. In fact, for many people in and around Wayne, the Huskers play second fiddle.

In this portion of the state, the Wildcats are the starts on Saturday, and Cunningham Field is center stage.

It's not that folks in Wayne don't love the Huskers. It's just that many have different priorities.

And that's just fine with Wayne State Coach Dennis Wagner.

"The Huskers' program has encouraged the importance of football in this state," Wagner says. "In fact, if it wasn't for the Huskers, we might not be as successful as we've been."

Say what?

"In a state like Nebraska, people look forward to fall Saturdays," he says. "Whether it's Nebraska or Wayne State, there's a lot of football pride here. Believe me, there are a lot of places where it's not like that. I've been there."

By the attention paid to the Huskers by the national media every season, Wayne State has been placed on the college football map —to a certain degree.

"Players everywhere know all about Nebraska's team," Wagner says. "They equate the state with good football."

As a result, if given the opportunity, those players often flock to Nebraska the same way talented young basketball players flock to Kentucky and Indiana to one of the dozens of colleges—any college—that dot their respective state maps.

A glance at this season's Wildcat roster supports Wagner's theory. Of the 91 players listed in this season's Wayne State media guide, 42 are from states other than Nebraska. One is from Germany.

Surprisingly, Wagner says, the stockpile of out-of-state talent is the rule rather than the exception at Wayne State.

"Most of the offensive skill players we have are from out of state simply because if you're a good skill player from Nebraska, you're going to go play for the Huskers," he says.

Because of this, Wagner and his assistant coaches tap their connections, particularly on the West Coast, to recruit skill-position players, steering talented high school running backs and junior college receivers to northeast Nebraska. They lure them with scholarships, dependable fan support and a wide-open offense.

Apparently, it has paid off for Wayne State.

Last season, the Wildcats led the NCAA Division II in total offense, averaging 581 yards and 45 points per game. The team's offensive firepower boosted the Wildcats to a 9-1 record and a rare spot in the Division II polls for most of the season. In addition, three graduating seniors extended their football careers to the professional level.

Sharing the state with one of the country's perennial football powers has not hindered attendance either. Last season, Wayne State's four home games pulled in 3,531 fans per game—not bad for a stadium that seats 3,500.

Through seven games this season, Wayne State's one-back set is fourth in total offense, averaging 488 yards -and is scoring more than 33 points per game. Wagner's emphasis on offensive balance is evident, with the Wildcats averaging 225 yards per game rushing and 263 yards per game passing.

The offense is led by sophomore quarterback Ray Powers from Papillion. Powers, who saw limited playing time last year as a reserve, says the Wildcats' wide-open offense is perfect for him.

"It highlights the quarterback, and I like that a lot," Powers says. "One of my goals is to play pro football."

That dream came true for Powers' predecessor, Brett Salisbury, who now starts for the Helsinki (Finland) East City Giants. Salisbury, who holds Wayne State records in several passing categories, was the European League's Most Valuable Player this season.

Lamont Rainey, Senior Running Back from Hanau Base HS, Hanau,Germany

The other two Wildcats from last year's team who made it to the professional level were defensive lineman Brad Otis with the Los Angeles Rams, and wide receiver Damon Thomas with the Buffalo Bills.

Although Powers says he hasn't yet felt the pressure of filling Salisbury's shoes, he admits he has yet to be satisfied with his performance.

"I know my capabilities, and I've felt all season like I can do a much better job," he says.

Powers was one heralded skill player the Huskers let slip through their grasp. As a senior at Papillion-LaVista High School, he was named first-team Class A All-State, and was selected to the Super State second team.

One player the coaches in Lincoln may have never heard of is Lamont Rainey, a senior running back from Hanau, Germany. Rainey, whose father is in the Army, earned all-conference honors while playing for Hanau Base High School. Despite his success in Europe's military high school leagues, Rainey was not heavily recruited. Even now, he isn't sure how he wound up in a Wildcat uniform.

"I don't know how it happened," he says. "I guess some coach back in high

Quaterback Ray Powers from Papillion-LaVista High School

school sent Coach Wagner some game films or something. I'll have to figure that out before I leave here."

Actually, when he arrived in Wayne, he wasn't sure what to think about the program.

"I knew it was a passing offense, so that made me a little hesitant," he says. "But I realized pretty quickly that an offense like that opens things up for the running game."

The Wildcat passing game opened things up well enough last season to allow Rainey to lead the team in rushing with 1,031 yards on 148 carries. He averaged 7 yards per carry and scored 13 touchdowns.

This season, he again leads all rushers at Wayne State with 792 yards and seven touchdowns through seven games.

Although Rainey has no regrets about coming to Wayne State, he still wants to end up at NU—as a law student. He plans to take his law school admissions test in December.

Although Wayne State's program has been spared the futility of competing with the Huskers for fan support, it still must endure the state's Big Red obsession. Wayne State coaches, players and fans all realize that stories about them on the front sports pages of Nebraska's largest newspapers are few and far between.

"We'd all get pretty depressed quickly if we expected as much media attention as the Huskers get," Wagner says. "Obviously, you want as much attention as you can get, but in a state with a team like Nebraska, it's clear where everyone is focused."

But media attention has been improving.

"It's kind of up to us," Wagner says. "When you're winning, more people want to read about you. Now all we need to do is keep it up."

Winning wasn't always a tradition at Wayne State. When Wagner arrived in 1989 from St. Cloud (Minn.) State, he inherited an 0-11 team. He and his assistants immediately went to work, reshaping an offense that could score points while recruiting better defensive players. Two seasons later, the Wildcats finished 7-4 – the first winning season of the program in six years.

"He's done an outstanding job since he got here," says Pete Chapman, Wayne State's athletic director and the coach Wagner replaced. "Everybody has been impressed." ■

Wide receiver Byron Chamberlain shows his strength and speed.

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NESM-11

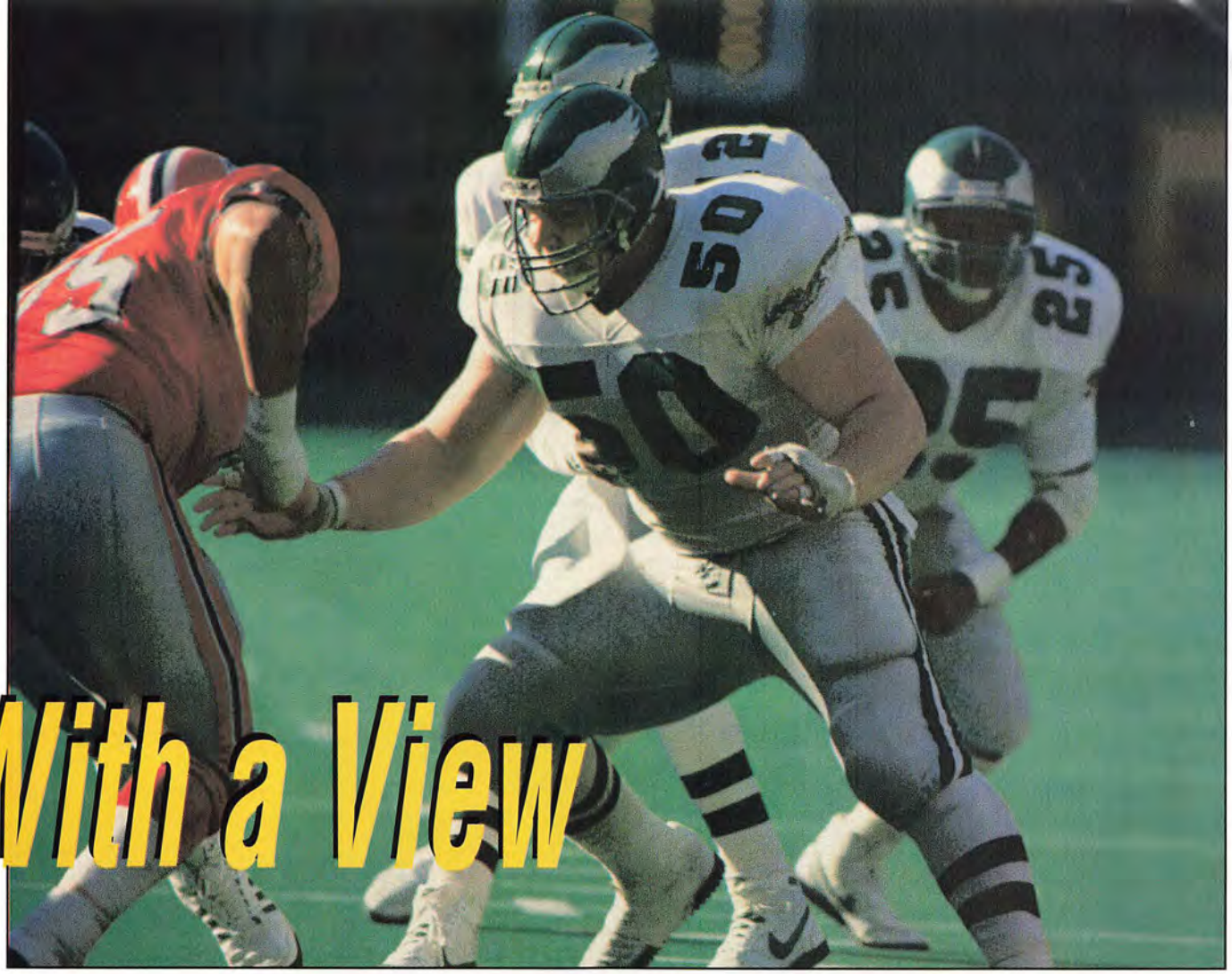
Rimington is now committed to finding a cure for cystic fibrosis

Dave Rimington's Room

The view from Dave Rimington's window has changed several times since he anchored Nebraska's offensive line in the early 1980s.

He's seen the Ohio River in all its splendor, and he's marveled at the wide open spaces of Wisconsin.

These days, Rimington's view is from on top, above the hustle of Wall Street in New York City. His view, which includes the World Trade Center and the Brooklyn Bridge, is impressive. The work he's doing is even more impressive.



With a View

Last year, Rimington began working with former Cincinnati Bengal teammate Boomer Esiason at the Heroes Foundation. Esiason, currently the quarterback for the New York Jets, became involved with the charitable organization when his son, Gunnar, was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis.

Although it seems like a big leap from the NFL, Rimington says trips he made to Hong Kong, Singapore and other Asian countries helped him get his priorities in order.

"Being there and seeing things really made me stop and evaluate what is and is not important to me," he says.

Rimington admits he's come a long way since his days as a Husker All-American. His list of honors includes: All-Big Eight his sophomore, junior and senior years, Big Eight Offensive Player of the Year as a junior, Outland Trophy winner his junior and senior years, and Lombardi Trophy recipient as a senior.

Rimington was the Cincinnati Bengals' first-round pick in the 1983 draft. At the time, National Football League scouts and prognosticators predicted he would have a long and stellar career.

From 1983 to 1987, he helped protect Esiason from opposing defensive linemen. In 1986, Rimington was named to the AFC squad at the NFL Pro Bowl.

"That was quite an honor for me," Rimmington says, "because that meant my fellow players and teammates thought enough of me to name me as one of the best at my position."

Rimington left Cincinnati in 1988 for Philadelphia as a free agent and spent the 1988–89 seasons with the Eagles. Chronic elbow and knee injuries limited his playing time and lengthened his time on the bench. He retired in 1990.

Rimington accepted his retirement without regret. "It wasn't really that difficult for me," he says. "I knew that I had pushed it as far as I could. Ultimately, the physicality of the week-to-week games took its toll.

"I knew from day one that I wasn't going to be able to play 15 to 20 years, so when it happened, I was prepared. I didn't fight it like some players who refuse to accept that their playing days are over. I was ready to move on and experience a different part of life — a different part of me."

Since Rimington left the limelight, he has earned his MBA at the University of Wisconsin. While at Wisconsin, he was a coach in the university's weight room. Later, he worked with the Badgers' offensive and defensive linemen.

Rimington is now committed to finding a cure for cystic fibrosis. While his focus is now on his work with the Heroes Foundation, he admits football isn't completely out of his system.

"I would like to do this for two to three years, or as long at it's enjoyable," he says. "I would one day like to coach again. If there was anything (Coach Tom Osborne) taught me at Nebraska, it was to be consistent in going after your dreams. I try to emulate that and follow those words each day."

A town should be entitled to brag a little when its only public high school sets state, regional and national athletic records.

So, upon driving into Wahoo from the east, a visitor wouldn't be surprised to see a sign, maybe even a large billboard, proclaiming the Wahoo High School varsity boys basketball team as Class B state champs six out of the last seven years. After all, a sign on the other side of town heralds the community's other high school, Bishop Neumann Central Catholic, as Class C-1 boys basketball champs in 1991.

In fact, a visitor couldn't complain if there were several signs around town. It isn't every day that a town with a population of almost 4,000 spawns a string of basketball teams that sent nine players on to play college ball, had a 117-game winning streak—still an all-time third-place national ranking—boasts a seven-year 170-3 record, and holds numerous conference and state records.

Yet, despite some critics' accusations that Wahoo places too much emphasis on boys basketball, there is no billboard, no sign. There used to be a sign near the airport, residents of this bedroom community say, but it disappeared several years ago when the Wahoo Warriors had only racked up half of their record-breaking achievements. No one seems quite sure why the sign went down or why it never went back up.

"I'm asking that question myself and I'm the mayor," Don Virgl says. "There were some problems with the size of the welcome sign because of state and federal regulations, so it was taken down, but after that, I'm not sure what happened to it."

Mick Anderson, Warrior coach for 18 years who recently retired to leave the Wahoo legacy for others to carry on, also wonders about the sign.

"It's been four years since the sign has been up and we keep wondering when it's going back up," Anderson says. "It's unbelievable that we can put a man on the moon but we can't put a sign up."

Not that the townspeople need a sign to remind them of the school's basketball prowess.

Says Mayor Virgl, a 1946 Wahoo High grad: "It's been the topic of the town in the coffee shops. It's quite a record for the town. We had gone to the state tournament once in the '40s, but that had been the extent of Wahoo being in the state finals."

The tradition of Wahoo basketball is known widely throughout the state as well.

Wahoo basketball coach Mick Anderson retired last season after 18 successful years.

Anderson, understandably, finds wherever he goes, people want to talk about his basketball teams. "I could be in Omaha, Grand Island, Norfolk, wherever, and it's the first thing people bring up. It doesn't bother me," Anderson says, "because I appreciate that people recognize our program."

Virgl says there isn't a place in Nebraska that he hasn't been asked, "How'd you do it?"

The answer to that question depends on who you talk to, but several themes keep emerging: Anderson, Wahoops, remarkable talent and drive, and community support.

"I give a lot of credit to the coach," Virgl says. "Mick Anderson did a lot to inspire these kids to want to do this, to want to train 12 months out of the year."

"The emphasis on basketball came from the kids themselves," says Paul Eddie, Wahoo High athletic director, whose own

sons played for Anderson. "We got in a group of pretty good athletes who wanted to be successful. It started about nine or 10 years ago with (former Nebraska football player) Steve Carmer's class. Kids in both football and basketball started working out, using the new weight room we got that year, getting stronger, having less injuries. We had never been to the state playoffs in football, and now we've been there, too, eight years in a row."

Wahoo Superintendent John Brennan, who oversees the 194 middle school students and 240 secondary students, believes the school was blessed with a "streak of neat kids." He says in the last six years, only a few of the basketball players have not been honor roll students.

"They've all been very positive. They've had support from home and they've set goals for themselves and team goals. We've had some natural leaders."

Since Wahoo's streak began in the mid-'80s, nine Warriors have gone on to play college ball, one to Division I University of Nebraska. They are Troy Glock, Nebraska Wesleyan University; Ryan Eddie, Jeff Simons and Randy Hoffman, Midland Lutheran College; Scott Latham, Hastings Community College; Joel Weyand, Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa.; Greg Hain and Mike Hancock, University of Nebraska at Kearney; and Jason Glock, a redshirt junior guard for Danny Nee's Huskers.

A definite factor in Wahoo and Neumann's success, many say, is a community grade-school-age basketball program called Wahoops. The Wahoops program, which runs January through early April, was started in the early '80s by parents who wanted their kids to have more basketball experience before they reached high school.

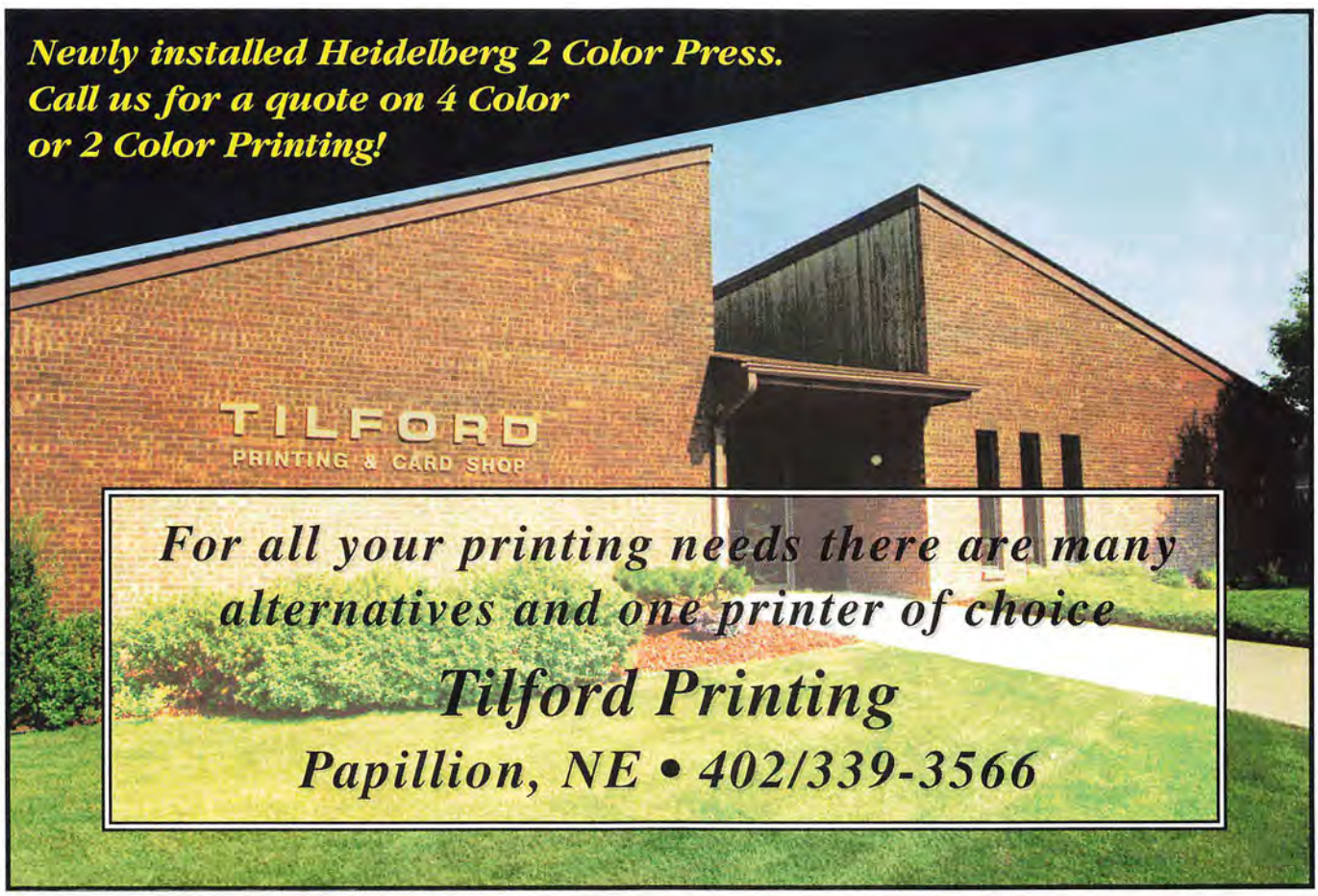
"Wahoops was created because we wanted to do a little more for our kids," Anderson says. "They weren't getting as much instruction as kids from bigger schools, as one of the smaller Class B schools, so they had to go out and work harder."

Mark Watton, Anderson's assistant for eight years and now head boys coach, says: "Wahoops gives them the proper fundamentals at a young age, so we don't have to spend the time later. Let's face it, we had a tremendous run of good players. They were easy kids to coach. They made coaching as easy as it can get."

After paying homage to Wahoops, the boys' talent and determination, and "a very dedicated and loyal assistant coaching staff," former coach Anderson gives credit to the whole community.

In all my years, I've never seen more support for a high school athletic team. We had tremendous support," Anderson says."People thought the program would go downhill after Jason Glock graduated, but it's bigger than any coach, any player. It goes deep into the community."

In 1991, when both the Neumann Cavaliers and the Warriors were in state finals, the entire town nearly was deserted as caravans of fans traveled south on Highway 77 to Lincoln. Hundreds gather weekly during basketball season to celebrate at the Veterans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Memorial Club downtown after games, which in Wahoo's case are nearly always victories.

Have there been any downers, any drawbacks to being the winningest basketball team in Nebraska history?

"We were in a situation for many years where it wasn't good enough to just win. It was very difficult to enjoy for very long the success or the state championship we had just won because people were inevitably talking about the next year," Anderson says.

Some of the runaway scores bothered him, too. "Even if we played our varsity players two quarters or less, it was hard to control. The coaches and the people who knew the game of basketball understood. We weren't about to tell our kids not to play hard, but some nights I didn't feel good about the scores. The last thing we wanted to do was embarrass anybody."

There would be the occasional letter to the editor that would complain that Wahoo placed too much emphasis on sports and not enough on academics.

"We do place emphasis on academics," says Athletic Director Eddie, "but you just don't see high test scores on newspaper sports pages. The sports page sells a lot of papers in a town this size. The athletics are an important part of the community. Everyone either graduated from here or worked here or has a relative who did."

If there's any cross-town jealousy, officials from both Neumann and Wahoo don't admit it and quickly dismiss the notion.

"Sixty percent of our students are not from Wahoo. They're from 10 different towns in the county. More than half of them don't even know anyone in Wahoo," says Father Michael Christensen, Neumann superintendent.

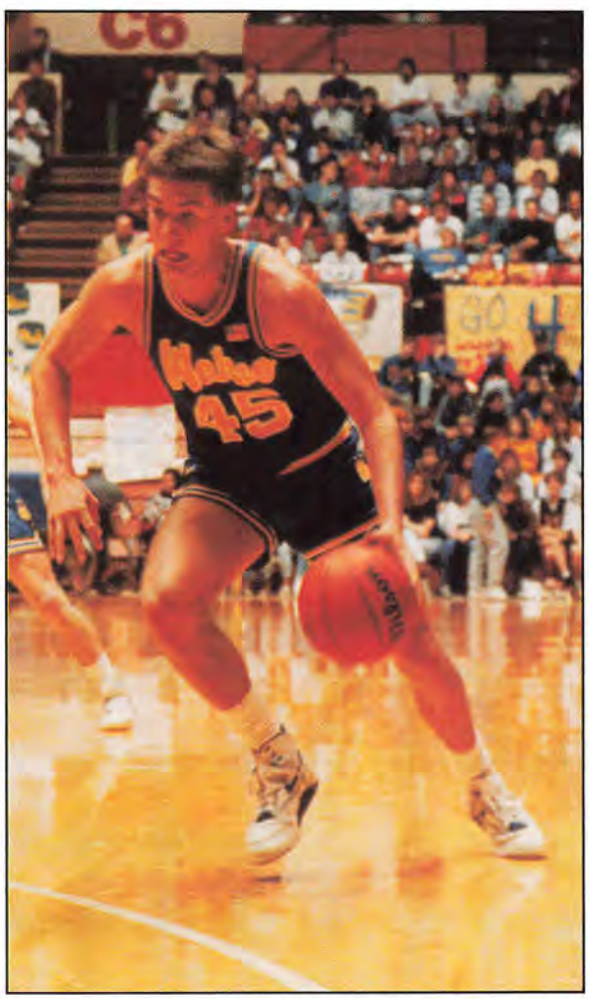
"There are Neumann fans and there are Wahoo fans," says Neumann head basketball coach Paul Johnson. "There's no fierce rivalry, no divided town. We've worked hard at making sure that doesn't happen."

While the two schools have not played each other often—mainly one occasionally in the holiday tournament they co-sponsor—things are changing this year.

Wahoo has been placed in Class C1 with Neumann because of a state reconfiguration, not a drop in enrollment. The two Wahoo teams will have to play each other to advance out of their subdistrict.

"Wahoo will be a challenge," says Neumann's Johnson. "They will definitely be among the elite in the district. They'll have a talented team, but so will we."

Wahoo's Watton returns the compliment, saying, "We'll have a tough time in the subdistrict—Neumann will be a big challenge."



Former Warrior guard Jason Glock, shown here at the state tournament in 1991, is a senior on the NU men's team.

Justin Anderson, the son of coach Mick Anderson, plays in the 1993 state tournament against Hartington Cedar Catholic.

Wahoo's most famous basketball alum, 6-foot--4 Nebraska guard Jason Glock, says Class C-1 "will definitely be easier on them (Wahoo). Some people said we didn't play the Class B powerhouses in the regular season, so I can't wait to hear them now."

Watton says fans can expect to see the same fast-paced style of play with aggressive defense, adding, "We'd be foolish to move away from what we've been doing." He lost four of his five starters, but says juniors Mike Simons, Josh Anderson, Eric Eddie and the rest of the team "know what our tradition is, they'll do their best."

As for that sign, Mayor Virgl says, "There's a movement underfoot to get it back up and I'm hoping we'll have it back up soon."

Between the Lines

by John Knicely

If you thumb through the "Guinness Book of World Records" you'll find the name of a remarkable Nebraska athlete.

Just over two years ago, Lincoln CPA Kris Rutford methodically swam his way around Manhattan Island in New York in a record-setting five hours and 53 minutes. The previous record, set by an Australian, had stood for seven years. Rutford beat the mark by 15 minutes and etched his name in the prestigious record book.

This feat was accomplished in relative obscurity. Most Nebraskans probably don't remember Rutford when he swam for the Huskers from 1979 to 1981. In 1988, Rutford became only the second Nebraskan to swim the English Channel.

These unheralded accomplishments speak highly of Rutford's ability. But what sets him apart from those with similar talent? Perhaps it's the word he uses to describe his motivation: Passion.

At age 35, Rutford says he is in love with long-distance swimming. He relishes the challenge of a marathon, especially if he must journey through extreme conditions. It's one thing, after all, to swim in a warm-water lake, and quite another to battle the icy swells and shifting currents of the English Channel for 10 hours.

Rutford refers to his successful channel crossing in 1988 as the ultimate accomplishment. His passion now burns to complete an endurance test which may even surpass that ordeal.

It dates back to the 1992 world record that Rutford set with his solo swim around Manhattan Island. The performance was only the first part of a greater goal: to win the annual Manhattan Island race. He accomplished that in 1993.

To complete the triple play, Rutford intends to swim that same course, but this time in the opposite direction. Although many have tried, no one has ever succeeded.

Rutford knows the difficulty from experience. Last summer, he too tried to become the first to finish the opposite-direction swim. He was forced to quit after logging 13 hours in the dirty waters of the Hudson, Harlem and East rivers.

Much of Rutford's progress in that endeavor was measured in inches because the reverse-direction swim is largely done against the current. Rutford also had to contend with floating garbage and, at one point, an ocean liner steaming forward in the same lane. He wisely decided to yield the right of way.

During the swim, his mind wandered. His thoughts ranged from imagining himself as the president of the United States to being in the back of an unemployment line.

Through it all, Rutford was encouraged by his ability to remain focused and not let things affect him. He had no control, however, over the events which occurred at the swim's 13-hour mark.

It was then his crew informed him that, for the next five hours, he would have to swim circles while waiting for the tide to change. After that it would be another two hours to the finish. With the late summer evening temperature dropping and his body already chilled by the water, Rutford had little choice but to abandon his attempt.

It's not the need for recognition that has motivated him to swim more than 5,000 miles in the last seven years.

Rutford didn't succeed, but the disappointment has not quelled his spirit. His focus is on the fact that he didn't fail. From the beginning, Rutford had trained for a 12-hour swim, and he surpassed that in spite of the difficult conditions. His error was in planning. He knows now that swimming against the current has the effect of doubling time and distance. This knowledge should help when planning his next attempt.

These days, Rutford trains as before in obscurity--with persistence and purpose. He's confident that the next time he wades into the filthy waters around Manhattan Island he will emerge with a new record.

If Rutford does succeed where others have failed, it's likely you and I may never hear about it. That's not a problem for Rutford.

It's not the need for recognition that has motivated him to swim more than 5,000 miles in the last seven years. In his own words, it's passion.

John Knicely can be seen weeknights on WOWT Channel 6 in Omaha.

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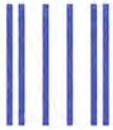

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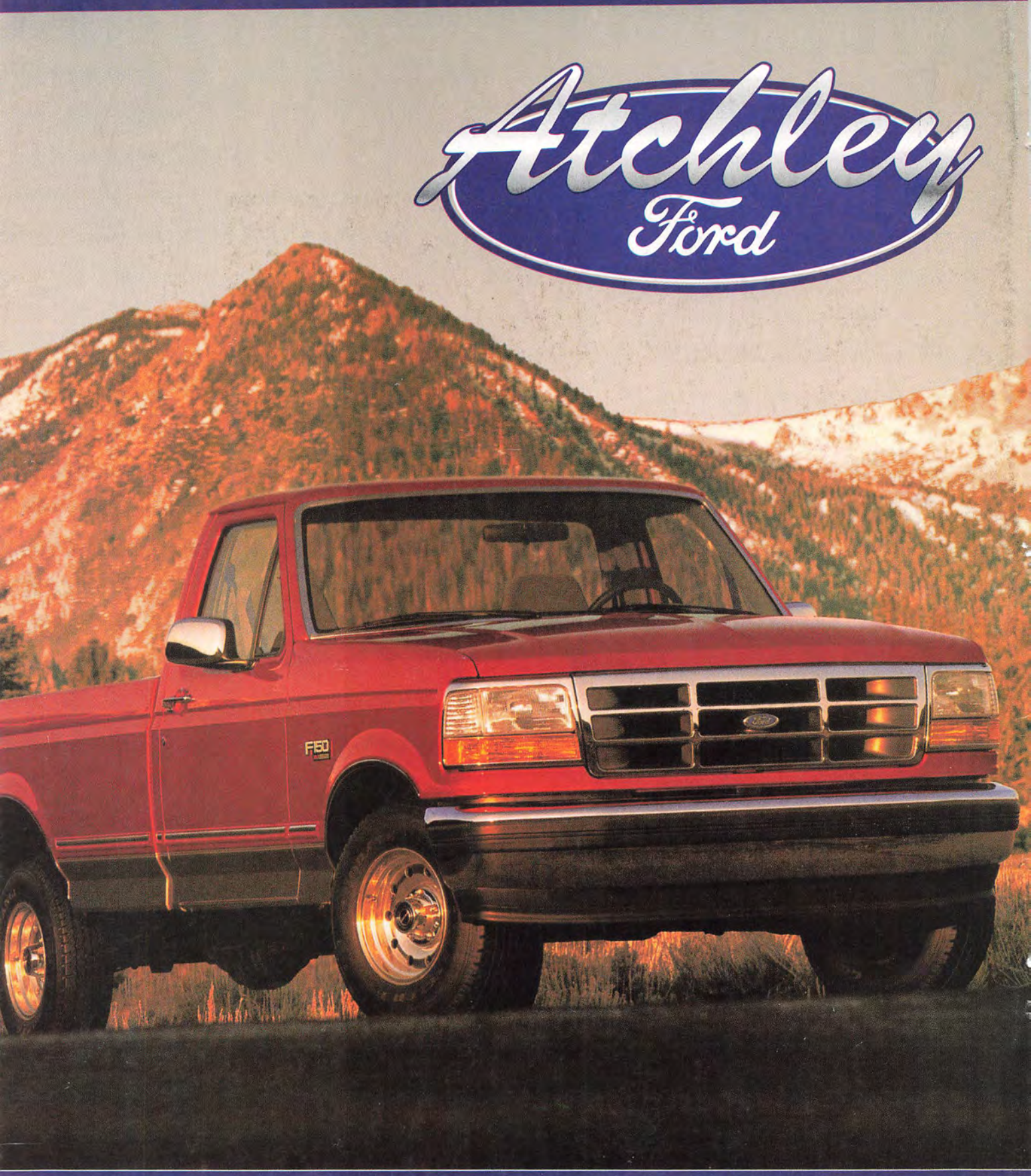

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